

SINK HOLLOW

**2017 USU
CREATIVE
WRITING
CONTEST
EDITION**

This special edition of Sink Hollow presents the winning entries of the Utah State University Creative Writing Contest, which is open to all USU undergraduate and graduate students from all departments and disciplines. We want to thank all our contestants this year for yet again raising the bar with their excellent work, and for helping to create such a vibrant and inclusive writing community here at USU and in Cache Valley.

Many thanks for the generosity and discriminating taste of our contest judges: Alex Baldwin, Matt DiOrion, Mary Ellen Greenwood, Brian McCuskey, Bonnie Moore, Paige Smitten, and Isaac Timm.

Thanks also go to Diane Buist, Lori Hyde, and Annie Nielsen from the English Department administrative staff, whose assistance in running the contest has been invaluable.

And an extra special thanks goes to the Sink Hollow staff who helped to run the contest and who have produced this beautiful issue of the magazine: Ethan Trunnell, Abi Newhouse, Shaun Anderson, Parker Schofield, Millie Tullis, Justin Smith, Dani Green, Andrew Simpson, Madison Asbill, Tyler Hurst, Challis Hackley, Abby Stewart, Jaesea Gatherum, Kaylee Dudley, Chris Davis, Jess Nani, Braden Steel, Marie Skinner, Marissa Neeley, Russ Beck, Shanan Ballam, and Robb Kunz.

—Charles Waugh, Contest Director

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et al.: Sink Hollow 2017 Creative Writing Contest Edition



UNDERGRADUATE FICTION

How We Fall

Abigail Newhouse
First Place Fiction
Undergraduate

ON THE FIRST day of the semester, a girl walks into our dark, auditorium-style classroom carrying her backpack so only one strap holds to her shoulder, the other falling limp to the side. So obviously nonchalant, but definitely wanting everyone to know she doesn't care. She slides across the back row, trips over people's bags and whispers sorry so loud that I can hear from the front of the classroom, and her hair falls over her face, so at first glance I believe I'm seeing my sister again.

But she sits down and shakes her hair behind her shoulders, and I see that her face is definitely not my sister's face, but it's close enough that I still stare. It's disappointing. My heart strobesc; I can feel the pounding in my whole body, so I try to refocus by preparing my slideshow. We'll talk about the syllabus today, mostly.

THREE YEARS AND twenty-two days ago, my younger sister went to New York. I still don't know why, exactly, but it had something to do with a man she'd met on the Internet who could get her into the celebrity business, essentially. Despite my fears about internet dating in general, my sister assured me they'd

been talking for months and months and he acted like such a good man, she felt no fear. I knew she wouldn't listen if I brought that man up, so I concentrated on the other problems: she hadn't even secured an apartment. Or a job. She only really owned dreams, and it was so infuriating, but she really thought she could make it that way. So I watched her go—in fact, she asked me to take her to the airport. We fought the whole way there. The dialogue might have sounded like this:

Me: You're being so stupid.

Her: I'm taking opportunities.

Me: Please don't do this.

Her: I can't stay in this town. Everyone in our family just stays here. I have to be someone else.

And the conclusion: I simply didn't understand her. She majored in drama, but she stayed in school for only a couple semesters. I had to let go. She'd have to finish her degree in life.

She waved from the terminal and laughed so I would see how excited and ready she felt. I just wanted to slap her. I waved back, hoping my face looked disapproving and polite, and told myself to save the screaming for when I'd be alone in my car. At that point I considered her decision dangerous, but now I think the differences between us got in the way of an open mind.

It hurts me that it's too late to smile.

THE GIRL WHO looks like my sister introduced herself as Heather Quarry. We'd gone around the room, learning everybody's name and what they like to do, and she said, "I have never liked English. I don't like overanalyzing things." I had laughed because I didn't know how to respond.

And then yesterday, I made an assignment for

each student to post once in the Q&A forum, so they'd be familiar with the system. And one student, this kid who looked like he was on his high school football team, but always benched, said, "What if I literally don't care about writing good?" So this morning I woke up disappointed because I still had nothing to say.

I keep hoping for this epiphany to rain down on me—this is how you create interest in an entry-level English class! But every day I walk into that dark slanted room and the students look at me with half-closed eyes. They know I'm a grad student. They see me as a peer. They don't comment and they don't question and thus, I believe I may be a failure. But at the same time I don't care, because they don't care, so it's a vicious cycle. Make coffee. Put my hair up. Who cares about makeup. Drive to campus. Teach for an hour, for the experience—the experience, I remind myself—keep doing this until you can move up.

And Heather keeps sitting in the very back, always on her phone. It's been long enough that I don't see her and immediately think she's my sister anymore. Now she blends with the rest of the students—slouched and mentally absent.

MY HUSBAND'S great-aunt has passed away. He barely knew her, but his parents decided to come for the funeral, so he thought we should probably go as well.

"I guess we should wear all black?" He looks through his suits. The morning sun rays pass through the small open spaces around our dark grey curtains. He can barely determine which color is which in the dim light.

"Isn't that more of a cliché at this point?" I still lay in bed, but turn to my side to watch him.

"I think it's just respectful." He pulls some pants

off the hanger. "Are these black enough?"

We take the road through campus. The cars move slow on this street, the speed limit only 25. All the trees have changed colors, so dead brown and gray leaves pock the gutters, the sidewalks and grass. As we drive, the leaves flurry around the tires. We pass dorms so old they actually look wrinkly, and then I see Heather walking on the sidewalk, and a car right next to her, crawling, with the windows down. She looks uncomfortable. But she also smiles.

"That's one of my students," I say. I turn to watch her as we pass.

"Should we see if she's okay?" His eyes flit from the road to his side mirror. Her shape gets smaller as we move forward.

"I don't know, should we?"

But we keep going, and I twist all the way around to watch her from the back window while we drive over a hill. Someone in the car opens a door. It looks like Heather might get in.

I think about Heather during the entire funeral. Did she look scared? I can't remember if her smile seemed genuine. I do remember, maybe, seeing a hand reach out from the car door, inviting her inside.

"Did you see a hand?" I whisper to my husband.

He jumps a bit. His great uncle speaks to the audience in front of the casket, telling us stories of his beloved, but not crying yet. His skin sags by his mouth and connects to his neck like a turkey. He wears all black except a floral necktie. He tells us it was his wife's favorite. We sit on folding chairs spread over the cemetery's dry and leaf-ridden grass. The traffic passing by allows enough noise for me to bother my husband in the middle of the great uncle's speech.

"Where? What hand?"

"You know. My student. The car. Did someone

pull her in?”

“Oh. I don’t know. I stopped watching.”

He turns slightly towards the speaker. I agonize. I picture Heather tied up in an empty warehouse. She has a black eye and lies on the cold concrete, hands smashed together and tied raw with rope. And someone has stuffed a dirty rag in her mouth. Why would they do that? What kind of sick person would do that to Heather? Sure, she had her flaws. She wasn’t the best student, never came on time, I don’t think she even posted in the Q&A forum, but that doesn’t mean she deserves to get beaten and left for dead.

But of course, I don’t know if that has actually happened.

Everyone at the funeral stands up. One by one, we reach into a bucket by the head of the casket, and it’s full of baby’s breath. We each take turns dropping them into the grave. This is how people should die.

When they’re ready and old.

“How did she die?” I ask my husband when we’re back in our quiet car.

“Cancer. Didn’t I tell you? Horrible pancreatic cancer.”

“Oh.”

So not exactly ready. If you think about it that way.

SO THEN, of course, on the drive back, even though I’ve tried to block it out, I remember my sister’s funeral—closed casket, empty casket, a mirage where I couldn’t look inside to say goodbye. I never had that chance because I never went out to visit, never just hid my pride under a blanket and smiled. My family all sat around drinking afterwards, all of us in black. Black hats, pants, tights, shoes, makeup, tears. We drank glass after glass of scotch and talked about how each of us would prefer to die: my husband said any

way as long as his eyes would be closed, my father said old age surrounded by his family, something he couldn’t feel, just a simple exit, and my mom, she’d prefer to be asleep, hopefully in the middle of a dream about Javier Bardem, but not the bad version of him, the version of him in the Spanish love stories, and I remember choking on the liquid in my throat, coughing, laughing, scoffing, saying I’d be sure to put that in her obituary, and my husband spilled the scotch when he flung his arms open laughing and then we cried, and we cried, and we cried.

I HADN’T TALKED to my sister for months when I found out she died. We used to talk pretty regularly—at least weekly—but after a while I honestly didn’t know what she did each day or where she lived. At first she’d give me some details over the phone or text, things like: Hi! Just about to meet up with my date at Central Park. What are you up to? Or Just saw Wicked on Broadway! You must come visit.

I didn’t know if she actually did those things. It had always been hard to tell with her—events always over-dramatized and things were always happening to her, as if she had no control over her own life. She posted pictures on all her social media sites, but mostly of her face, or buildings, or the front of cute restaurants. I felt afraid that if I visited, I wouldn’t like what I saw. For instance, her apartment on Park Avenue—which I never saw a picture of—might have actually been a shelter for women who have nowhere else to go. And maybe that shelter was on Park. Maybe she just made her reality seem a little better than it might have been.

I should have just visited. I really should have.

I REMEMBER the last time I'd tried to call. I stood in my kitchen and looked out the large bay window. Clouds had grayed over the afternoon sky, and it made me feel cold. I poured hot water in our teapot and turned on the stove while I dialed her number and clamped the phone between my shoulder and ear. I remember feeling proud that I multitasked.

My husband sat on the couch and flipped through different television channels. He'd changed out of his suit from work, but still wore his long black socks with baggy shorts. He looked like a shadow against the window behind him. We'd never really had problems. We fell naturally into marriage. He called me irrational once or twice.

The phone just rang, a steady hum in my ear. Finally her voicemail: "Hi! It's me. I can't be by my phone all the time because I'm busy living. I'll call you back when I can!"

I didn't leave a message. The teapot whistled behind me. I flipped my phone over so I couldn't see the screen.

THE NEXT DAY on campus I put on a slideshow about poetry, trying to generate interest in different genres. The student's faces glow from the screen's light. They look tired. I start tripping over my words. The sentences in my head don't match up with what I'm saying. I can't see Heather anywhere.

And my sister. Why didn't she answer all that time ago? I never saw her body. My mother called to tell me that my sister drowned in the Hudson. She learned from my sister's date that they didn't find the body. Who is "they" and why didn't "they" try hard enough? My husband sent me to therapy to talk about it—the therapist told me I hadn't come to terms with the fact that my sister died because the body had not

been found. Now I picture her tied up in the same dirty warehouse I'd previously pictured Heather. Like maybe she didn't die. Maybe some kidnapper collects women with dark brown hair and stages a death for them.

I keep thinking about the car that stopped Heather. A silver Jeep. I want to reach out and shut the door for her. The car probably held a group of the bad type of men. My husband has asked me to not be so general about men when I'm angry about rape, misogyny, etc. He says some good men still live out there, himself included. Still, I hope Heather carried pepper spray.

After we go over different forms of poetry, I give my students an in-class assignment to try a limerick on their own—an easy form. I didn't have this part of the class planned, but giving the students something to do means I can sit at my desk and pretend I'm sorting through papers, but really I'll sort through thoughts.

OUR ROOM IS pitch black, but I can't sleep. I read—just to face my husband. He's started to breathe deeply. The lines on his shirt straighten and wrinkle again with every breath. I rub his back, knowing he'll wake up immediately.

"What?" he says, half groggy and half impatient.

"Do you think she's dead?"

He lays on his back, rubs his hands over his face. "Who?"

It takes me a second to think of the name because my sister's face pops up first. "My student. Heather." He tells me the same things I've tried to tell myself the past couple days—the car might have held some of her friends coming to pick her up like they'd planned. The car might have been her parents, trying to stop her from running away. Maybe her friends had played

some sort of trick on her where they left her somewhere then went back to get her. The car definitely did not have a scary person, or five, ready to take her away forever.

But still, I tell him, I keep picturing her in these awful situations—the dark warehouse, her raped and mutilated body sinking to the bottom of the lake by campus, drugged and now part of underground human trafficking.

“She looks like Jane,” I say. My sister.

“Ah,” my husband says. We both look at the ceiling, glowing gray from moonlight. He reaches for my hand.

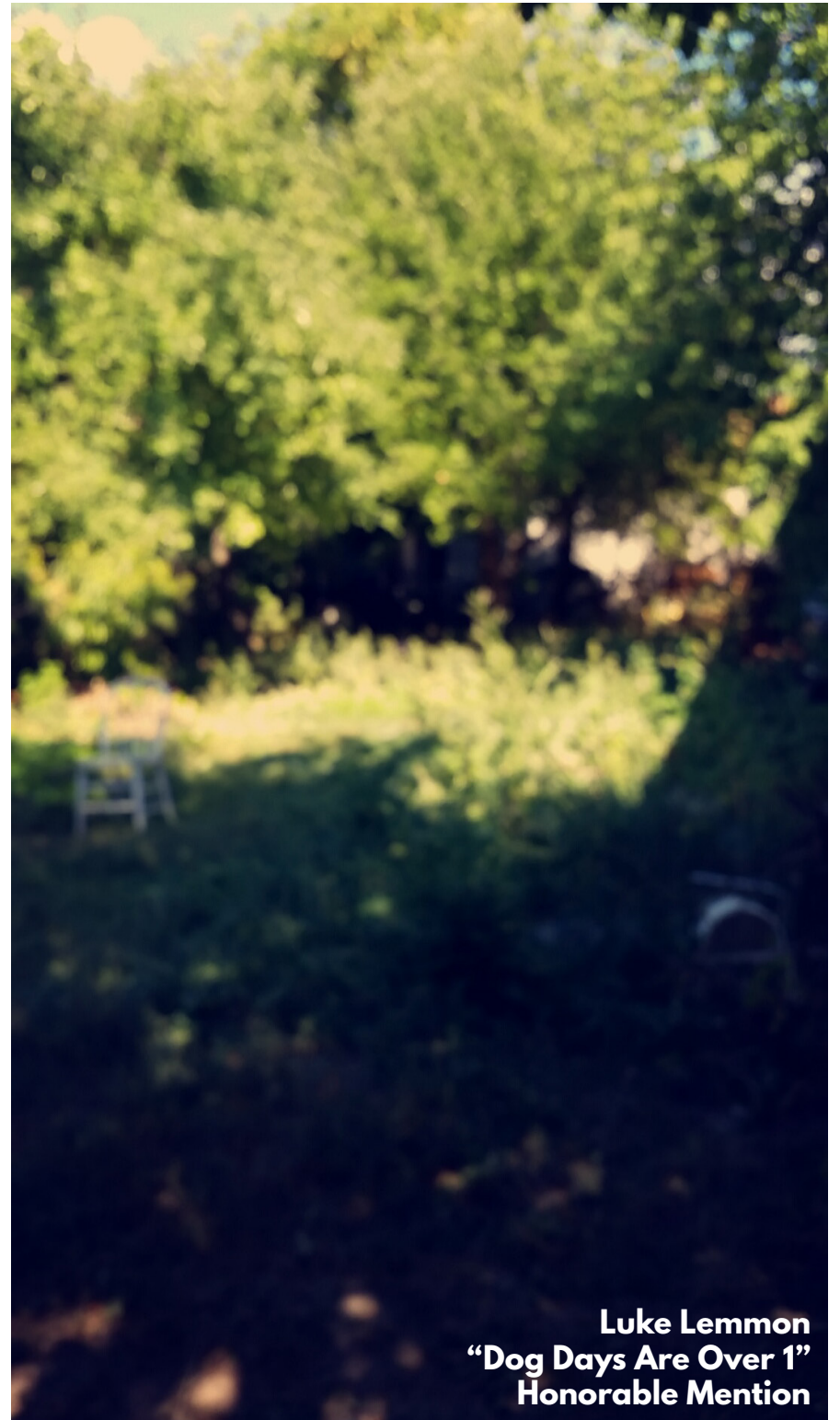
JANE AND I were born only thirteen months apart. When I think of her now, I try to forget New York. Some guy had tried to contact me after she died—the guy she’d gone jet skiing with on the Hudson. I answered once and when he introduced himself and why he called, I hung up right away. He tried to call me two more times but I didn’t want his explanations, and if I never talked to him I could feel less guilty blaming him for everything.

Instead I think about Jane underneath the willow in our backyard. We loved that tree—the way the branches and leaves drooped like stage curtains, swaying so slightly in the lazy breeze, stippled glimpses of sunlight. We’d play school underneath the tree; I’d be the teacher, she’d be the student, and we’d talk about how nice it would be to really have school outside in the sun, in the shade. Maybe then, she would say, I’d actually want to be there.

We loved the tree in the daytime. At night, it looked menacing. I stayed out too late in the yard one night by myself, and when the sun sunk behind the earth, I heard noises: heavy breathing, a rustle, a

footstep on the large roots. We slept in the same bed for years after that. I had nightmares about tall, dark figures. She told me stories about kittens to put me back to sleep.

Eventually, of course, we got too old for the tree



and for each other. She'd get a boyfriend, she'd be gone all the time, she'd slap me in the car if I said I didn't like the current relationship. But then, sometimes we'd get smoothies after school, her favorite, and we'd laugh together again.

We stayed at a weird distance, though, after high school. I finished college, she tried college out for a couple semesters, then went home and worked. We didn't approve of each other's choices. She thought we'd live in California together, a dream we'd only really talked about when we were young and sleeping in the same room. I don't know why she held onto that dream for us, out of everything. I thought she was stupid for staying home and working as a barista. What a life, I'd tell her. What a life.

HEATHER DOESN'T COME to class the next day. Doesn't answer her email, either.

AND THEN WE get a long weekend for Fall Break. My husband and I sit together on the couch and he watches soccer and I grade papers. The same boy who I assumed played football but never really played football wrote a limerick about football. I set his paper aside and stare out the large window. Outside we can see a tiny back road and then another apartment building across the way. It rains outside. They keep their blinds shut lately, whereas I used to be able to see inside their apartment, a view of their television, but now even that inconsequential view is shut out. The rain makes the view blurry anyway. And something about that feels symbolic to me. Like maybe I haven't been able to see clearly for quite some time.

I WAKE UP twisted in the sheets. I'd had a dream about Jane under the willow tree and the green leaves

turned gray and the dirt faded to concrete and I couldn't find her.

I can't sleep, so I make some tea. The packet has a carousel on it, and I remember a trip to the amusement park, where mom crouched to our height and told us, "If you get lost, look for a mother with a stroller to help you. Don't ask a man." We agreed and then ran to the merry-go-round. I sat on a giraffe, and Jane picked a unicorn.

I WALK INTO class, and my eyes feel heavy. I swallow coffee in tiny sips so I don't spill as I walk. Papers slip in my hands so when I place them on my desk they kind of explode out of my grasp. I set my coffee down and hear: "Mrs. Blue?"

I look up and Heather stands in front of me.

Heather.

I probably look like a crazy person, eyes wide and mouth gaping open, and it doesn't help that I grab her shoulders and say, half whispering, half yelling, a weird sort of hiss, "Heather. Where have you been?" Her shoulders tense under my grip. I let go and she backs away. "I just wanted to say sorry for missing class. I had some family stuff come up."

I just stare at her. "Thank you."

She turns to walk to her seat. She doesn't look like Jane close up. Not really. Something in the cheekbones, maybe.

I SIT ACROSS from my husband and we both stare at my phone in the middle of the table. He pushes it closer to me. I push it back.

"Do you want me to call?" he asks.

"Well, no, I should probably do it." We stare at each other. He shrugs and leans over the table on his elbows. "Or we could put it on speaker."

Besides his great-aunt, he's never experienced a death in the family. No one close to him. He and my sister never had the chance to bond because he had only met her once at our wedding. She flew back to New York the next day. And even though I want to remember all of us crying after my sister's funeral, drunk, black masses, I know that my husband only pulled me close and whispered that it would be okay. No tears. Assumptions.

Maybe this makes him more rational. A couple months after the funeral he told me he wished the death had never happened so we could feel normal again. I said I would heal. Slowly.

So I pick up the phone, and I turn the speaker on. Jane's Hudson date answers, seems surprised, his voice rumble and static. He tells me the story. It pours out of him like cement. They had been jet skiing and he'd gone ahead and he's so sorry he did that and he turned around and she waved and smiled so he kept going, but it was kind of stormy that day, but they decided to go anyway, and he's so sorry he did that, and when he turned around again he could barely see her through the fog, so he went back but couldn't find her and then her jet ski appeared through the fog, like a movie, like a scary movie, and he couldn't see her anywhere, and they'd gone so far out, he kept calling her name, so he headed back and called the police but by the time he'd come back it had been too long, and they said the jet ski floated without her, probably too far from where she must have fallen.

I hang up the phone and my husband and I move to the couch and I don't know what changes for him, but we cry together, and through the tears I see he wears a red shirt.

IN MY CITY, fall comes and goes like a turning page.

I walk to campus to feel the sun mixed with cool breeze while it lasts. Students herd around me, and we all walk together. Some sit in the shade; they read or sleep or pick grass and talk in groups. I don't want to go inside.

So when I stand in front of my class and look at their tired, bored faces—Heather in the back looking at her phone—I say, “What if we had class outside today?”

Some shrug, some sit forward.

“Everyone up. We're going outside.”

We congregate on the grass in front of our building, under a tree that sheds red and orange and yellow leaves once in a while. The students collect them as they fall. Heather sits against the trunk, her notebook lies open on her lap and she leans her head back on the bark. She stares at something far off and I feel for her. Family stuff can hover over you like a noose. We write down sounds we hear and talk about literary devices—onomatopoeia, imagery, personification, apostrophe.

A weight lifts. Maybe the winter snow can be like a freshly erased whiteboard.

I hope we can find peace. ●

Cost of Steel

Brandyn Hawkes
Second Place Fiction
Undergraduate

Behind a makeshift lean-to of cattails and long grass the smell of wet earth hung like a soggy quilt. The pale sky sat low in rolls of gray. Deep inside the belly pocket of his camouflaged sweatshirt his fingers probed for a warmth that had to be there. *Shit*. Tucked inside his hands, little fingers burrowed into his palms like a nest of baby mice squirming against its mother's body—blindly nuzzling for warmth. Low humming from the cheese plant in the distance where his father worked was occasionally interrupted by a gentle tapping of droplets on the brim of his hat. Moisture escaped the hanging gray and he wished for somewhere warm to hide. The plant used the fields in the pastures as a dumping ground for wasted milk product. His father's boss let them hunt the ponds where it collected. Ducks couldn't resist the sulfuric rot—boiling off the whey pools, steaming in the cold like a hot corpulent soup—Mallards, Gadwalls, Wood Ducks, and much later in the season, Goldeneyes would gather for the night.

He tucked inside the neck of his oversized sweatshirt on chance the wind might change and smother the granular, earthy fragrance with Gossner's podgy stench. His older brother sat next to him sorting out

the calls. They clanked around his neck—a wind chime of carved wood and molded plastic. Their father huddled nearby on an old five-gallon bucket. He leaned on his shotgun like an old man sleeping on his cane at the bus stop. They sat and waited. *They have to fly soon* the boy thought, *it's almost dark*.

"You boys remember your reed shirts?"

"Sure thing Dad!" Benji smiled. They lobbed their backpacks into the truck bed.

"What took you so long?" Christian said dryly. "I almost had to go to Home Ec. — geez." He held the door open, motioning for his younger brother to occupy the uncomfortable spot in the middle. Benji was still waiting on his growth spurt. Until it came, or unless Dad won the lottery and got a bigger truck, he was doomed to occupy the tiny spot in the middle of the bench seat, straddling the gear shift.

"I had to get Grandpa's gun for Benji—and a donut." He ran his tongue over his teeth and sent it prodding into his cheek. Benji imagined some white powder specs on his father's beard. *Powdered? Jelly filled?* Those were his favorite, especially dunked in Mom's hot chocolate. "Let's go get after 'em boys." A smile edged under his bristly moustache while the boys scoured the truck for the 'other' donut.

They had waited patiently. Almost an entire half-day of school! Checking his locker before, after, and once in-between each of his four class periods, Benji had to see it there once more—his camouflaged sweater: reed print, striped in shades of brown and green. Long pointed leaves, layered over speckled brown cattail tops, wove together like a quilted plaid of Bear River autumn. It was a birthday present from

Dad earlier that summer. He wore it to the first day of school even though it was 95 degrees out. Benji ducked the insults on the bus. *They can't shoot anyways.* His brother got one the year before, but this one was his. *That's what men wear. That's what I wear.*

It was Benji's first year of the hunt. He was finally a licensed hunter and he thirsted for game. Benji always wanted to be his brother, the first pick, the go-to fishing buddy of Dad and Grandpa, the cleaner of fish, the holder of guns, the leader of brothers. Yet he always had to sit in the middle, sleep in the lower bunk, and go with Mom to the grocery store while Dad and Christian went to the river.

"What's wrong Benji?" his father asked. "Nervous?" He felt Benji's leg bouncing on the ball of his left foot as he straddled the gear shift.

"No. I'm just thinking."

"Well don't think too hard, you might break something," his father joked, giving his leg a squeeze just above the knee.

"If he had anything to break," Christian teased, pinching Benji below his floating rib.

"Staaaahp!" whined Benji, thrusting out his elbow.

"Christian! Leave him alone!" their father yelled reaching for the stick. "I'll take you both back to school!" Silence. Their elbows jostled for a better position against the other's hip bone.

The rusty blue Ford rolled into the Wal-Mart parking lot with a low groan. It jumped and shuttered to a stop next to the cart return.

"What are we doing here?" Benji flustered, eager to get out and away from his pestering tumor of a brother.

"We need shells." Their father slid out of the truck, "And more donuts." Head down, he sat on the cart return rail and leafed through his wallet. Christian jumped out and slammed the door behind him. Benji, with thoughts of glorious, powdery, raspberry donut, tried to follow but hadn't expected a closing door. It latched and Benji couldn't stop his forward motion in time. His forehead met the window with a dull thump and his body pressed into the old blue knit fabric and vinyl of the door. He winced. One hand stroked his reddening brow while the other fished blindly under the weight of his body for the handle. Christian yanked the rusted door clear and Benji spilled out onto the wet pavement. His palms slapped the wet asphalt and he deftly turned his shoulder into the fall and somersaulted onto his back.

"Boys!" their father cautioned. He was examining some weathered piece of receipt from the leathery abyss of his wallet. Benji rolled onto his stomach and lay there for a moment, watching his brother's reflection in an oil-slicked puddle. He towered over him. The corners of Christian's mouth twisted smugly upwards. Benji's face inflamed. *I hate him.* He gathered himself and stood to face his brother. Christian was a full head taller than him. Broad shoulders stretched his gray thermal top and his thick jaw was already showing signs of hair. He was a wrestler. Benji's fists clenched—palms stinging, he ejected a sharp middle finger at his brother. Christian lowered his forehead. Shoulders squared, he charged. It took two steps to close the distance. Christian's arm shot out, twisting a fistful of Benji's sweatshirt. His fist cocked. Benji cowered in his grip, bracing for the blow.

"Dammit, Boys!" their father huffed, stuffing his wallet into the torn back pocket of his twenty-year-

old jeans. “That’s enough!” Christian released. Trying to dam the flow of tears, Benji sniffled. He was swimming in his reed camouflaged sweatshirt. Its sleeves hung past his fingers.

“You’ll grow into it,” his father had laughed when Benji tried it on for the first time.

He wiped his nose on his sleeve and bunched them back over his bony elbows. A couple of rogue tears rolled down his cheeks and dripped from his smooth chin. The little oily pool at his feet drank them up like they had belonged there.

“Wuss,” Christian mouthed. “Sorry Dad. It was self-defense!”

“Save it for the ducks!” Their father snorted. He locked a giant bear paw on to Christian’s arm and pushed him in front while Benji trailed them into the store. Christian goosed his neck around his father’s waist and mouthed, “Vac-uum.”

Fuck you, too.

“Which ones?” Benji was stuck in contemplation, scanning the shelf under a flickering light tube that was approaching its death. He saw Christian standing by the fishing poles testing each one for its durability, bending it to the point where he was sure it would snap. *Idiot.*

“Grandpa’s gun is a 20-gauge,” his father said, stroking his beard. “So you’ll need these but in steel shot.” His voice trailed off: “Won’t let us shoot the lead anymore.” Like a Stephen King novel, left to right, top to bottom, he read the shelves until he discovered the macabre. “Sixteen dollars!” He grabbed a box turning it over in his hands like a Rubik’s cube.

“How in the hell do they expect people to af-

ford this crap!”

Benji shied away. Like his brother, it was best to give Dad his space when things went wrong. His father picked up a box of 20-gauge game loads that they used for grouse, doves, and clay pigeons. “It don’t make sense,” he said, scrutinizing the box. “These ‘r cheaper than glazed donuts but those...” He weighed the cubes against each other, letting his hands bounce slightly as if their weight had more to do with their worth than what the label was telling him.

“Them damn things are gonna kill me this season.” He put the second box back on the shelf, shaking his head. “Twelve dollars over lead shot.” He tucked a box each of 20- and 12-gauge steel shot under his arm. “Damn near sixty cents a shell.” He looked around as if he had lost something. “Christian?! Come on. Let’s get out of here before they raise the price on donuts!” Contemplating the ammo display one last time, a yellow face smiled at him. “Roll-back, my ass,” he muttered. Christian appeared with a rolled up *Field & Stream* sticking out of his back pocket. Still grumbling, Dad nodded toward the grocery aisle. “You boys go grab some donuts—glazed.”

“Come on Benja-lina,” Christian grabbed a fistful of sweater and pulled his little brother towards the center of the store. Benji’s hopes of powdery, jelly-filled heaven sunk. His head turtled into his shoulders. They were more expensive though, so he didn’t complain.

In the wetted down folds of cattails and grass, Christian rolled a ball of mud over and over in his fingers until it was smooth and perfect. Benji watched sections of the hanging mist through the stripes of green. *His fingers are probably just as cold as mine. Hopefully*

they are colder, maybe he'll get frostbite. He let his thoughts run. Christian staring out the living room window—Dad backing down the driveway for another fishing trip—Benji sitting shotgun—poor Christian waving a fingerless goodbye before going with Mom to the grocery store. He smiled to himself before something hard plinked off the side of his head and landed in the mud next to his mat of cattails with a sticky plop. A little clay cannon ball had wrenched him away from justice. Benji's eyes shot fire. Christian put a finger to his pursed lips, nodding skyward. Excitement poured from his face. He pointed two fingers at his own eyes and then to the ground. "Ducks," he mouthed, tapping a finger to his ear and pointing into the leaden sky. Like a dog contemplating a biscuit, Benji's head cocked sideways. Through the grayed-out vapor of the drizzled autumn evening he heard an obscure squeak rise above the whirring cheese plant. No. *Whistling!* They came in quick succession, growing louder then fading into the misty roils of the dirty cotton sky. Christian brought a call to his mouth from his wind chime necklace to coerce them back.

"Get ready Benny boy," whispered his father. "They're coming back around!"

The group of seven descended in front of the make-shift blinds like fighter jets approaching the deck of a carrier. In a controlled dive the leader swooped down in a giant arc with six others behind, wings locked, gear down. His green head shimmered against the doughy rolls of gray in the dusky reflection of the pond.

"Take 'em!" His father stood, leveling his cane to his shoulder. The ducks tried to halt their descent and stalled, flapping against their momentum. Boom! The shockwave from his father's gun compressed Ben-

ji's chest. He wasn't ready. Boom! Boom! Ba-Boom Boom! Christian was standing to his right and had just ejected his final shell. An iridescent green head bobbed in the brown water, turning the ripples pink. A brown hen folded and fell towards the cloudy pestilent liquid. A third crashed downwards like a small pile of black wet leaves against the ashen sky. Benji managed to stand and was pointing his shaking gun at the leader of the duck-footed squadron. It quacked and stretched and rose away from his fallen wingmen.

"Come on, Benji! Shoot!" His father's hairy finger pointed towards the escaping duck.

Benji's eyelids squished together. His jaw clenched, and his cheeks pulled the corners of his mouth upward in anticipation.

Click.

Where was the boom? He opened his eyes.

"Pull the hammer!" Christian shouted, trying to jam another shell into his magazine. "You've got to pull the hammer back!"

Benji lowered Grandpa's old single-shot, gripped the hammer, and clicked it into place. Rising, he leveled just ahead of the sparrow-sized duck as it climbed for freedom. Boom! The barrel fixed to the escaping mallard bucked. A tuft of feathers ejected from its wing like a leaky feather pillow smashing into his brother's face.

"I got it!" Benji squealed. "I got one, Dad!"

Neck stretched to the sky, the bird fought to regain altitude, left wing flapping madly, right pinned against its body. It trundled downwards, disappearing behind a stand of maples across the stream that fed the pond. The only evidence of it ever being hovered in the sky like ash.

“Well you sure scared the hell out of it anyways.” His father peered over the cattails. “I think there’s a crossing over there.”

Benji’s heart thumped against the wall of his chest. He made his way through the marsh smiling like Christmas morning—like when he finally got his hunting license—like wearing his camo sweater to school in August—like a man. *Finally*. A branchless log, half rotted, lay across the creamy brown stream. Benji let his weight down easy. The log teetered and cracked, sucking further into the muck. He felt the cold waste saturate his feet through his old split rubber boots. It squelched in between his toes on every step and he smiled. The duck watched.

It was nestled on its dirty white belly at the base of a maple. Its neck rigid—attentive. A single eye pointed at Benji. Smile vanishing, his approach cautious and slow. He thought of the crazy roosters on uncle Bob’s farm. *Roosters are assholes!* Every time the boys went to play on the swing in the hay barn they were chased, harassed, and bullied up the stack by the cackling fowls. *Ducks are in the same family aren’t they?* It quacked and stood to face the boy. Its right wing drooped. He could see a white point sticking out from a bald, fleshy patch of skin on its wing. It was broken. Benji found the small lever that broke the barrel of his shotgun and ejected the spent casing. It smelled like fireworks. He pulled another smooth yellow shell out of his pocket, placed it in the opening, and snapped the barrel back together with the stock. The wounded mallard quacked and shuffled nervously. Benji took a deep breath and pointed the gun—the bead covering the alert gaze of its right pupil. He fingered the trigger, pulled the hammer back, and tried to steady his sway.



Bailee Jones
“Sister”
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate

“Sixty cents a shell!” his father had cried aloud as if he had just shut his fingers in the truck door. His voice had bounced off the shelves, ricocheted against the tile, and pierced the walls of the fluorescent Wal-Mart and everyone in it. Now it resonated between Benji’s ears like a tuning fork.

The gun lowered, orange stick legs shifted nervously away, and its black-beaded eye fixed on the young boy. He lay his gun on a small patch of dried out grass. *Roosters are fast. Ducks are like roosters. This duck is fast.*

He darted, stepped, shuffled and leapt. Its orange sticks were pumping, wing flapping. It jumped sideways, rose in the air a couple of feet and hit the ground running. Always running, changing direction. Had there been a banjo playing, the marsh would have come alive with laughter. Frogs, horseflies, and the stand of maples would whoop and holler at him like he was trying to catch a greased pig. The pair danced around the mushy grove, weaving, darting, swearing,

and quacking until his boot found purchase on a tuft of dried mud and he launched himself skyward. Stretching his whole body, he landed prone—his face slapping wet earth. His arm shook violently as he clutched a single orange leg. “Gotcha!” Turning his head, he spat out granules of swampy mud and grasped the green headed prize to his chest. Breathing heavily, they calmed under the pallid grey.

Where’s my knife? His mousey fingers explored the bottom of his pockets. *Shit. Rocks?* Not in this swamp. He scanned the grassy mud hole for an answer, clutching the quacking football in his arms. *A duck is like a rooster. Roosters are a type of chicken. Grouse are a type of chicken. This duck must be like a grouse.* On a grouse hunt last year he saw Dad pick up a fluttering bird that had been rendered flightless just like his duck. Gripping it by the neck with its little ping-pong ball feathery head on top of his giant fist. Dad swung his hand in tight circles like he was lowering a trailer jack onto the old Ford’s ball hitch. Faster and faster for four or five revolutions. Pop! Game over. He had tossed the head aside, collected the ball of feathers and stuffed it in his vest. No shells, knives, or rocks needed. *I can do that.* He didn’t like glazed donuts that much. *Sixty cents a shell. Powdered donuts are expensive.*

Twisting, twisting, twisting. The long neck of the mallard corkscrewed under his clutch of strained, spinning mice. He spun until he could spin no more and caught the inflated body against his chest with his free arm. Squeezing with all his muster, its beak managed to open and close rhythmically, dumbly sucking air down its green corkscrewed wind pipe. *Ducks don’t have eyelashes.* He peered into the widened black orb. Its pink tongue flexed and curled in its yellowed

mouth. He held it close, compressing its body, staring into its unblinking eyeball. It’s shuddering would not cease. It breathed, and struggled, and pressed its webbed feet against his thigh. *Where is my knife!* The smooth black marble surrounded by shimmering green locked onto his watery brown eyes. It opened its beak yet again. Small raspy quacks escaped its desperate face and it choked down another breath. *This duck is not like a grouse.*

Under the cold, darkening sky, he was sweating. The tops of the cattails swayed gently with the late autumn breeze. Christian and his father’s silhouetted hats faced each other. Bills bobbed, shook, and nodded in conversation. A flash of brilliant white popped through the long slender leaves of the blind—capturing the moment for Mom’s photo album. Christian and Dad hunting ducks. Christian and Dad skinning a deer. Christian and Dad holding a string of rainbows. *Benji holding his new pet duck with the shot up wing and the floppy neck.* He ached for a flash, for a page in the album, for a stringer of fish. No longer able to hold on to the twisted, corkscrewed barrel of the duck’s neck, he released and stretched his fingers against his sweater. Its neck unraveled itself and slumped over Benji’s arm. Pressed against his breast, he felt it expand and deflate and expand. *I’m sorry.*

Deepening coils of dirty corded sky began assembling into a sooty black and he balanced in a murky wetland, waiting for the world’s consent, but when the world stops and breathes upon the willing, fairness is only a word.

Snorting and convulsing, the duck struggled to lift its contorted neck.

“Benji!” his father called. “Did you find that

duck?”

“Yeah Dad! Just a minute!” He was using two hands now. “I almost got it!” They shook with his intensifying grip.

“We’ve got to go. Shooting hours are up!”

“Almost—” His fists stacked on top of one another with its gleaming green head and yellow bill silently screaming for air. Its webbed feet pressed against his leg, resisting, pushing—living. He remembered playing baseball in the cul-de-sac at home, gripping the bat with the neighbor boy, deciding who would hit first. Fist over fist, the duck’s head shivered in his grip, one broken wing full of steel bbs dangled limp at its side, while the other trod the air methodically.

The black tips of banana-yellow beak spread, closed, and spread again. Its body still. Blackening gray spools of darkness curved in its wet marble stare. A flock of starlings sped overhead, collecting the last of the mosquitoes before settling away from the cold. Their collective whoosh sounded like a fully leafed branch cutting through the air. Benji watched, his white fists spread apart—stretching. He was tired and sweating; his knuckles white and cold. Through the green feathers, between spreading knuckles, a slit of red cracked across its surface like flesh lightning. The red chasm of exposed neck muscle widened. Skin which held the feathers peeled away, revealing a swollen vein running along the wet surface of its pink, throbbing throat. Like opposing magnets his hands pushed away from each other; helpless against the invisible, natural force. Its head pressed against the knuckle of his left thumb—a warm crunch reverberated through his clamped fist and the head pulled free. Manic shudders coursed through its body—lurching, flapping. Blood poured from the fleshy stump where

shimmering green feathers had once been and warmed his aching nest of little mice fingers. Its eyes closed, no longer searching the deepening sky and his soggy face for an answer. Mouth agape, its pink fleshy tongue locked in silent protest. Benji slumped in the mud, exhausted, and cold. A silent wind rolled up his back and pinched his neck with frosted callousness. Shaking in the slop, he cried. Through the tears, his cramped fingers struggled to release the green head. He pressed the duck’s body into his sweatshirt, feeling the last of its warmth. *This bird is not like a rooster. It is not like a grouse. It is a duck. My duck.*

“Gross.” Christian’s upper lip quivered. Under arched eyebrows his eyes dampened. “Benji—are you—did—oh man.” He knelt next to his little brother in the darkening muck and gripped his shoulders with his big gloves. “That’s a nice duck brother!” With feigned excitement he hugged Benji close. “That was a helluva shot!” Christian picked up the body, pulled his brother upright, and handed him Grandpa’s gun that had been left in the grass. Benji looked up, wiping the back of his free hand against his eyelids, muddy tears and blood streaked across his face. Their eyes met. Christian took off his gloves, licked his thumb, and wiped the blood away. Stepping on the bodiless green head Christian’s boot pressed it into the mawkish nothing. “C’mon, let’s get out of this shit and go show Dad.” Christian’s arm draped over Benji’s shoulder and the brothers crossed the stream. ●

I Am Your Messiah

*Andrew Simpson
Third Place Fiction
Undergraduate*

Deb liked to sip vodka and talk about Jesus Christ. Howard thought that nailing a man to a cross didn't make him any more important than the thousands of other nameless, faceless bodies that the Romans had crucified. She liked to talk about religion when she got drunk. She staggered across the parlor to the leather couch beneath the bay window. Glare from the ceiling fixtures blocked out the mountains and trees. As she made her way—fingers wrapped around the neck of a bottle of Smirnoff—she kicked off her shoes. Howard hated drinking with her. At some point, she turned combative and her logic failed. He hated to see her saying things she didn't mean. He knew she didn't mean them.

She crossed her legs, then flopped back into the cold embrace of the sofa; Howard found he loved the crooked smile that crossed her face. He couldn't help himself from loving it, or her. She never shouted when she drank, merely meandered in and out of her thoughts, crossed and recrossed ideas until she lost herself in her own dripping speech.

"There's just so much happiness in Jesus," she

said slowly. Howard said okay, but he didn't think getting slobbering drunk seemed very Christian. Something told him the early Catholic missionaries didn't show up inebriated and full of a semi-erotic fascination with a man that the Romans nailed to a tree. As Deb's bottle of vodka slowly drained a glass at a time, Howard danced in and out of a room crowded with speech, striving to keep aloof of Christ and all things holy. Fifteen years before, they met at a multi-faith choir function. She arrived with a Baptist congregation. She wore a light blue dress that stopped just above her knees and she laughed at all the puns her minister made. Howard came with his friends from the United Church of Christ, a ruddy grin on his face, cheeks tired from singing and laughing with his cohorts at the ridiculous hats they saw. He left with Deb's phone number and called her the next day.

The bottle Deb brought with her rolled across the stone floor and Howard lifted himself from the wicker chair by the record player. He wore a complacent smirk as he carried her to bed. Step carefully down the hallway and into their bedroom, make sure not to smack her head against the doorframe; moonlight sprawled across the sheets tucked neatly under the sides of the mattress. The bed looked like an altar, perhaps like the altar upon which Abraham laid Isaac. The raised stone tablet welcomed a fresh victim and Howard laid his wife down on sheets that he could never stain with her blood even as he entertained the thought. Deb hummed tunelessly as he laid her on her side. Howard never met anyone else that hummed while they slept. No melody guided her notes, but Howard smiled every time he heard it. Depending on the day and on the position of the sun relative to the house and maybe even depending on which direction the wind moved in relation to Saturn, Howard burned

with tranquility and peace when he sat with Deb. On other days he hid from her like a deer from cougars. On the bed next to her, watching her breathe—her face half lit by moonlight and cheeks flushed from drinking—a balloon of emotion filled slowly in his chest and worked its way up into his throat so that he had to turn away, his smile the only thing keeping the swelling of emotion from exploding.

The next morning laying in bed, he stared out the window. Behind him, Deb rested motionless, all but dead to the world. Mornings scared him. He worried that the sun would wake him one day and he'd be startled to find that apathy had crept upon him in the night, placed a tap in his side and drained all love and affection from the heart in his chest. These thoughts only laid siege upon his mind in the morning and he wondered what it would feel like to wake up and simply not care for or feel anything towards the woman that slept in his bed. Perhaps he slept in her bed.

He sat on the edge of the bed—why jostle her?—and then stood with the caution of a crook. Cold stone made the skin on his feet tighten, goose bumps formed a complex topography of hills and valleys on his bare chest and shoulders. Pad across the room, skin on the slate floor sniffing, his feet sticking at every step. Through the window he saw the grove of aspens shuddering in the predawn light. He, too, shuddered and for a moment imagined that the room gave way to the mountains; Deb, the bed, the walls and concrete floors all fell behind as he flew through the window. The breeze brushed his hair; crisp, leaf-decayed musk filling his lungs, his blood and his mind. He stood naked, shivering from the dew that fell on his skin. He sprinted past brush and tree, through grass and over stones. Adrenaline mixed

with euphoria. He heard the nearby deer rustling in their grass beds and a shadow crossed his mind too late as he sprinted on. Shouldn't he go back to bed? What if Deb woke up? He ducked beneath a fallen trunk then hopped over a lichen-covered stone. The power of movement made him smile, and his face split wide open into a white grin. He smelled on the wind a scent that threw the world sideways, and the smile slunk into the brush. The creeping acrid stench of civilization smothered Howard for the space of a breath before he burst upon a clearing in the trees. In the emptiness, a cabin of wood and stone, an unholy marriage of the elements, obtrusive and blatant in its foreignness. A large window opened the nearest wall of the dwelling; a man pressed his hands against the glass and his eyes pleaded for release.

In bed, in their room, Deb rolled over and spoke through sleep. "Babe, come back to bed. Let's sleep in today." Howard lowered the hands he'd pressed against the window, turning to cross an ocean of stone to reach the arms of his wife. He had never left the room, and this troubled him.

They passed the morning sipping coffee from mugs that Howard had shaped on a wheel. He bought the pottery wheel and the clay one day on a whim and toyed around in a room they called the studio, staining the carpet at the base of the stand a red-orange that never came clean. His hands dried and cracked. The electric hum of the motor glazed his mind and some days he would simply stare at the spinning lump of clay for hours. The studio mostly had comfortable chairs for reading and lots of light, but served as a thinking space for new ideas and hobbies when they showed up to visit. Deb encouraged him to pursue the work and had helped pay for a twelve-week course

that he only attended for six weeks. When she asked why he quit going, Howard said that pottery had no passion anymore. Halfway down the hall, on the left was a closet full of easels, tripods and camera gear, the pottery wheel, and Howard's book collection.

An odd pang of guilt and regret prodded him on the chest as he passed the closet a couple hours after breakfast. He dropped out of college after meeting Deb and had worked as a warehouse clerk to put Deb through the rest of school. When she decided to continue on to law school, he had found seasonal work painting cell phone towers. He left every May and came back in September. One weekend a month she flew out to meet him in Kentucky, or Nevada, or Illinois, or wherever his job took him. He took another weekend every month to catch a flight home to Colorado, but mostly they called each other. He arrived home three weeks before. Over breakfast and lunch and a couple drinks in the evening the first week he spent at home, they decided he should look for a change in occupation.

He opened the door to the closet. His Nikon camera hung from a peg on the wall. The body of the camera had white scuffs and scratches on black plastic. A long scratch on the left side of the camera reminded him of the afternoon he spent on his belly in a field peeking through a telephoto lens at a doe and fawn. They took lazy steps and though they couldn't see him, Howard swore they struck poses on purpose. After a couple hours of lying in musky sweet smelling grass, he watched the pair amble off into the trees at the edge of the meadow. He closed the door of the closet. When the deer had joined the shadows of the trees, Howard had laid there still, watching the point where they had faded from sight. Didn't life, his life, have the same nature? Didn't it fade into the shadows,

just a little bit more every day? When would he start to live, simply because he enjoyed living? He walked to the kitchen. Deb said he looked professional and lectured him about the things he should say during his interview with the law firm. She'd pulled some strings with some colleagues that needed an office aid and they agreed to interview Howard. The road to town followed a path more crooked than Deb's logic after she'd downed a few glasses of Jack Daniels.

He knew she meant well, setting up the interview for him. "Someone has to put your name out there. If you won't, I will." That's what she said a week ago when she let him know about the interview. He didn't want his name out there. That meant that people would know him, have expectations for him and assumptions they had made about him. He hated assumptions.

The interview had passed like the slow removal of a bandage, tugging at the skin and tearing open old wounds. The oozing conversation made Howard sick to his stomach. They told him as they shook his hand and smiled that he didn't quite seem to have what they needed. Turns out, he needed a degree to do clerical work. As he drove back, he mused about how little he could accomplish at this point in his life. He considered going back to school to finish his degree.

When he returned home, Deb lay lost somewhere in a bottle of gin, sleeping on the couch. She had begun to drink more after working on a rigorous divorce dispute that lasted six months. She and her client won the battle, but something shifted inside of Deb's mind as she watched a family fall apart. She came home from the office with three bottles of vodka and a case of beers one night and never looked back.

Howard gazed at Deb from the front door as

he undid his tie and the buttons to his shirt. Society tended to cripple the beautiful ones. He stripped as he walked to the bedroom, picked up a lightweight layer and loaded up his pack. He hooked a pair of dirt-caked trail running shoes with his fingers. He sat on the floor and pulled the shoes over his feet. The motion came mechanically and signaled a freedom from commitment. When he walked out the door, with those shoes on his feet, he forgot everything. He forgot his name, forgot that he had a wife. He simply forgot that he had any life other than running. He yearned for that release. Rising from the floor in the bedroom, he made his way through dark hallways and rooms to the living room. He knelt next to Deb and then kissed her on the forehead. She breathed easily, her nose whistling a little with each breath. Howard stood, his knees cracking in protest, then opened the door and set out into the night.

An owl flitted across his vision, floating in and then out of the beam of his headlamp. He continued along until a glint on the trail caught his eye. A spider that looked like a crab no bigger than a golf ball crawled along, eyes glinting in the lamplight, signaling. It seemed to plead with Howard, sending out lights of its own, begging him not to leave it alone in the darkness to fall prey to some grotesque feeder of the night. Its body, a sickly white-blue, all legs and eyes, consumed too soon by the abyss at Howard's feet. Almost like a signal for help. Out of the darkness a demented thought struck him. Maybe the spider didn't signal, at least not for help. Perhaps that white ambling menace existed as the only source of illumination in the realm of darkness, stalking about, preying on the lightless and pitiful victims of the night.

From the skipping half-light cast by Howard's headlamp emerged a man with ashen skin. Howard

jumped mid-stride. "Shit!" he said as he backpedaled. The runner lifted a hand to shield his eyes against the light, casting long fingers of shadow across his face. Howard muttered a half-hearted apology as he fumbled to dim the lamp. The runner took a hesitant step towards Howard and lifted the other hand towards the source of light. He wore a short loincloth that hung off his hips and only barely covered his crotch. Matted white hair spilled off his head, down his neck and shoulders and reached the middle of his back. His beard stretched to his chest, stained with blacks and browns and yellows. He took another step toward Howard, his chest rising and falling slightly. Over the reek of his own sweat, Howard could smell the runner. He stank of piss and blood. As he drew closer, Howard saw his face. Pale skin hung loosely about high cheekbones, face pocked by wrinkles and scars. Purple lips pulled back in a sneer, bearing a sparse number of brown teeth in fierce defiance of the light. Strands of hair streamed down in front of that sagging face, sticking in the long tendrils of his beard. Howard thought of a painting he had seen of Moses, leaning on a staff, beard and hair blown by the force of a bush consumed in sacred conflagration.

He could hear Deb in his head, panic in her voice. "You saw what on your run? You can't run like this anymore, Howard. You're not going to come back one of these times and then who will take care of me?" The aged runner took one more step and stood peering at Howard, hand still raised. The extended hand tapped the bulb once, and shot back as though the light would burn. Howard smiled and said, "It's an LED. Very little heat. Look. It doesn't burn." He raised a hand and rested it in front of the headlamp. He wondered about how this guy had never seen a headlamp. They stood there chuffing the frigid night

air, staring at one another in the dim light.

Gazing into chalky eyes, Howard felt the panic start to soften as the adrenaline settled in his veins. The night air drew words from his mouth.

“I need a Moses.”

The runner hopped back a pace and padded away up the trail, puffs of swirling dirt into the night air with each footfall. His feet, wrapped in pale leather moccasins, knifed through stones and branches. Howard hesitated a beat. He wondered if he should just let him go. He looked back down the hill, the narrow beam of light from his headlamp making it feel like a tunnel. He looked back up the trail and saw the bouncing white mop of hair half way up another climb. He smiled a little as he thought about Moses trail running, then followed in his footsteps. He did need a Moses.

The night passed and they ticked mile after mile. The runner never spoke, never deviated from the trail, didn't flinch when they startled sage grouse from the stupor of slumber, and didn't duck as brush owls flew into the light of the headlamp. Any sense of unease that Howard had felt at their first meeting dissipated entirely. The rhythm of their trek soothed and calmed him. He stopped thinking about the horrible interview from that afternoon. His pack bounced and crinkled, swishing against his jacket. He dimmed the headlamp, let his eyes adjust and then finally shut it off. They ran in silence, led by the pale white of the moon. The musk of dirt and sweat, aromatic, filled his lungs. At the peak of a grueling climb, Howard stopped and the runner stopped with him.

“I know you're not real,” Howard said. The runner looked at him from behind those white eyes and made no indication that Howard had spoken. “Still,

thank you for coming with me for so long.”

After dinner the next evening, Deb walked to the bedroom and then to the parlor. She didn't pull a bottle of vodka from the liquor cabinet in the kitchen. She clutched her leather-bound bible to her knees and sat on the edge of the couch. Conversation wandered from politics to the changing leaves. Howard put a record on the stand, turning the volume down low on the squealing, trumpet-driven jazz, and settling into his favorite wicker chair. He loved it because he didn't feel like it tried to consume him, unlike most recliners and chairs. He loved hearing the creak of the fibers beneath his weight. He trailed his hands along the wood, thinking about the years of life it held captive, memories of a forest, a saw mill, a furniture shop, of countless homes before coming to rest in a stone-clad living room at the base of the Colorado Rockies. Howard thought about the trees outside and how long autumn evenings held a sense of breathless beauty. They hinted of warm summer nights put to rest and the sharp cold of the months to come. Leaning forward, elbows on his knees, he rested his face on open palms, listening to the music. He could hear his breathing and thought back to the top of the moonlit hill. Deb broke his meditation in a way that she never had before.

“Do you—Do you believe in God anymore?”

Howard took a long, sharp, sucking breath through his teeth and held it for a moment before letting the air rush out his nose. He looked up from the ground and watched her face. She hadn't touched a drop this evening. The vinyl spun on the stand like a tireless top, the needle threading down the one-way maze to the inevitable end. Crooning jazz washed out of the wooden box speakers on either side of the re-

cord player. Over the sizzle of cymbals and warble of the sax, he held company with his thoughts and their buzzing choir. Deb sat as she had the moment she'd asked him the question. Her right hand fidgeted with the hem of her floral print skirt and the left draped over the enormous leather-bound bible in her lap. Her curious, cold blue eyes stared at him.

Howard wondered as he looked over her shoulder at the window. The window reflected the back of her head and the room. Who is God? Or rather, what is He? Why is He someone or something that should take precedent over anything else in this world? Better yet, why should I give a shit about Him? He opened his mouth and paused. His lips made a smacking sound as they parted and it fell on the stroke of a drum. He gave a half smile at that, and then uttered a single word. "No." Deb blanched. Her left hand clutched the edge of the Bible's cover and her lips trembled. She didn't rise; she didn't scream at him. She sat there, her icy blue eyes pleading. The record spun on. The drummer switched from splashing brushes on cymbals and snare to a slow quiet pattern on the ride cymbal. The bass throbbed low and soft. Guitar warbled and growled to life. Up and down the notes rose then skittered from their heights into the low register. The music intensified the questions in Howard's mind. On and on the guitarist played, spurring his thoughts to follow. He rubbed the stubble on his upper lip and said, "I don't believe in God. I haven't for a while now. I can't find Him in my life anymore. Maybe it's that I don't have a place for Him, or maybe He just doesn't have room for me."

Deb sat back on the couch. She let the Bible fall to the ground. Tears welled in her eyes and fell down her cheeks. Howard opened the cupboard below the record player and grabbed two scotch glasses and a

bottle of Johnnie Walker. He stood, crossed the room and placed the glasses and the bottle on the ground next to the crumpled Bible. Through tears, Deb looked up at him and said, "Howard, I'm lost."

Howard knelt, wedged his arms under her legs and pulled her to his chest. The slate felt cold and hard beneath his knees and Deb trembled as she began to sob. He slid her to the side of the couch, sat down next to her and pulled his quivering, weeping wife onto his lap. He buried his face in her hair and kissed the top of her head. She clutched his shirt at the base of his neck and Howard felt tears slip onto his collarbone. He freed his right arm and rubbed her back and side and down to her thigh. He thought about how lost he felt too and looked for what he could say.

"Deb. Deb, where are you?" She turned and looked at him, her long black hair catching and dragging through the stubble on his chin. She stared at him through red-rimmed watery eyes. He chuckled a little and said, "I know where you are physically, but where are you up here?" He bumped her head with his chin. She opened her mouth, a stand of saliva bridging the void between her lips and told him that she didn't know, that she felt lost and didn't know where to look to find herself. They talked into the night, Howard's words washed over her grief like spring storms baptizing the mountains. The record reached the end of its course and skipped over static and the fading notes of a ballad.

He dreamed that he awoke on the floor of the front room, the slate warm where he had lain. The front door, flung wide, let fall mountain air into the house, the door waving and waving and waving. A warm breeze wafted in and caressed his chest. Howard lifted his body to all fours as the breeze licked his

skin and rolled a yellow aspen leaf up against his right hand. He picked the leaf up by the stem and twisted it, like the record before he'd blacked out. Where did Deb go? He glanced back into the parlor and saw the shattered black teeth of broken vinyl scattered across the room. Not far from him lay an empty bottle of Jack Daniels and the wreckage of a glass. He didn't remember drinking last night. He never opened the bottle.

He stood, barefoot and shirtless. All the lights in the house left on. Through the open door, the breeze skipped again. His eyes grew hot and his breathing shallow. The room around him erupted into a rolling yellow, furious pinks and oranges clawing at the air. Howard staggered, searching wildly for the source of the fire. Heat smothered him like a blanket from the Devil himself. What a thought, the Devil offering a man a blanket. Almost endearing. Howard drank in the heat that scraped at his chest and felt the mountain air kiss his back and shoulders. He backed towards the front door, away from the conflagration. The flames stretched, popping, hissing as they melted fabric, consumed oxygen, pressed against the ceiling. Howard turned and ran. Out the door, straight into the aspens. He didn't turn as the roof caught fire. No man stood at the window to watch as Howard disappeared into the night. Further and further into the hills he ran. Back in the smoldering wreckage of his home, the clay mugs split with heat. The runner with milk-white eyes walked among the ruins, the coals shifting but never harming him, his long white beard taking on orange hues, wafting in the pummeling heat. Moses walked in the ashes. Howard ran, and as he ran he began to frantically scream his wife's name, breathlessly shouting and gasping as he lanced through the night.

He awoke in bed, Deb crouched next to him, worry in her eyes. "Howard, you started screaming my name! I'm right here. I'm right here." Howard blinked in the early morning light and then sat up against the dark walnut headboard. Her fear-hardened features softened after she searched his eyes for a moment.

Howard called around during the morning and then afternoon and lined up another interview, this time with a small company that stood in need of a social media manager. Howard figured he could use the few skills he had as a photographer to bluff his way through the interview. Deb called in sick at her firm and spent the autumn afternoon in a low-slung wooden chair in front of the stone façade of their house. The leaves lilted through the air, occasionally jumping into the book in her lap like a needy cat. As the sun began to fall into the mountains, lighting the dying day ablaze with crimson and orange, Howard walked out the front door. He held the old leather-bound bible under his arm. He approached the fire pit set in the ground ten yards from their home. He looked at the ashes left from nights sipping wine by firelight. Deb stood from her chair and walked across the grass to stand next to him. Howard turned and looked at her profile. She took the bible from under his arm. She bent and placed it in the fire pit. From his pocket, Howard drew a lighter and crouched next to her. ●



UNDERGRADUATE POETRY

Painting a One-Night

*Andrew Romriell
First Place
Undergraduate*

“She is solid.

As for me, I am watercolor.

I wash off.”

—Anne Sexton, “For my lover, Returning to His Wife.”

Anonymity is key—
the lifeblood of the culture.
Beauty in non-solidity. Doorbells
that ring like knocks on wood
invoke the protection of nature and God
and latex.
If only.

Breathing,

I cry myself a martyr, a product
of my time. Of my people.
Rather, I am a watered color.

I am a sweet aroma of peach skin.
A color of pale blue pillowcases and pink
sheets; a rainbow
spectrum of faded pigments
that leak beside creaking, groaning,
shifting lights and walls.

And then I am gone—slipped
away to the click of a brass lock.
I assure myself, I know what this was.

I know I am watercolor.

I so easily wash off.

Release

“Forevermore (and even after I was raised) I swore
nothing—but nothing—would be beneath me.”
—Heather McHugh, “I Knew I’d Sing.”

I was young when I first saw that word—
Seven-years-three-months-and-seventeen-days,
if I remember right.
I didn’t understand the term
scrawled so carelessly on a bathroom stall
with a safety pin:

FAG

It cried from silver gleaming beneath congested
coats of green paint.
I didn’t know then that they meant me,
that they scrawled it on my
skin when I was seven.

Nine years and I’d see the word again
carved purposefully on myself. Scarlett
relief flowed from my name—

FAG

released between my eyes.
A whirl of pain and scars and blood, I wrung the
truth from poisoned nerves

as if I could bleed the word
from my body if I just
cut
deep
enough.
Vibrant red could conceal my admission, sear
attention into my mind.

FAG

blistered lips and skin;
I wept in admonition,
ached for every wrong,
screaming, God! God!
Release!
All while blind and bleeding,

crumpled into the bedroom mirror,
wondering whatever happened to that boy
in a bathroom stall,
reading a word he didn’t recognize
was him.

The Pulp on Which We Write

Aspens blacken with slick, dark strokes,
hammered in by slathered smoke.
Cascading blossoms smudge
red-inked words on crinkled pages.

Hammered in by slathered smoke,
luminous fingers sear crisp rain of
red-inked words on crinkled pages.
Rage slides steaming down pressurized tongues and

luminous fingers sear
smudged, sweet mist from my mouth.
Rage always slides steaming down my pressurized tongue,
pushing the words out out out.

I smudge sweet mist from my mouth;
I bleed, burn, and scream,
pushing the words out.
Writing is a war

in which I bleed, burn, and scream.
Cascading blossoms smudge
a war on writing
as aspens blacken with slick, dark strokes.

Tradition

Millie Tullis
Second Place
Undergraduate

Until The Enlightenment
In Russia, you could cut
your wife's nose off.
Often fathers handed their new son-in-laws
A whip during the wedding ceremony.
Slightly less often, the bride
would take off her husband's shoes their first night
(I picture her on her knees)
And she would find a smaller whip
In the shoe, beneath his soles.
(Did her eyes linger on his feet
When her arm reached above her head
To hand the last bit over?)

My darling, I don't know why
I remember things like this
Sometimes it feels like I seek them out
Sometimes it feels like
They're all there is.

Sometimes it's like we're passed down from two tribes
And maybe I'm doing something historical
And brave,
Marrying you.

By burning it all and giving slippery union to the same
Strange history.

Grocery Store Line

You leave me there
To pick up cheerios

The woman behind me scratches
Her arms, says,

Don't you hate it
When your friends think you're on drugs
But you're not

Later, you tell me she comes
Into the comic shop

Every once in awhile
To sell her boyfriend's videogames

For bail. His name is Left Eye
Because of the star tattoo

Blackening half his face.
You say she flinches

Around him, walks
Behind him

I wonder where she sleeps

What that looks like

A Month Ago I Killed A Mouse

I

The cat had played with her for hours
Her stringy pink legs shook under his paw
There was blood on her soft back

And there was something horrible about the way
The thing looked on her side breathing like she was
About to hold her crush's hand for the first time

Just try to breathe under all that crushing
The mouse was too familiar to kill
But too familiar to live

I was tired and I fell asleep after I dropped it
All mangled not yet dead into the tall black can

Her eyes
so wet and dark.

II

He cracked you open in a bathtub
February on your arms
You were butter
You were always butter
Only you didn't know it

How did it happen? He told you it didn't happen
You didn't fight him off

He pulled out and came on
The first quilt your sister made
He came on the patch
That was softest, the kind of soft
You've seen advertised for baby quilts
Lemon yellow with polka dot bumps
Underbelly soft

He came and you said nothing
And he got up to leave and you let him
Your body stripped off like a peeled carrot
The underskin shining with hurt

He told you to walk him to the door
You wore your roommate's blanket
He told you to take it off
Had you kiss him goodbye after he
Took an apple from the bowl on the counter

You did nothing
He left you unpeeling
Trying to lose all flesh in the bathtub
Take off take off
There must be something untouched underneath

Your crying had never sounded like that
Language-less

Smallest animal

Modern Poetry

Chris Davis
Third Place
Undergraduate

Gesticulations of grandeur,
like tripping down the street after your cousin with
pants around your ankles spouting
dumbass vernacular –
a facetious attempt to prove the
impossible status of erudite.

Stuttering iambic enjamb-
ment through loquacious lips,
an unfitting feat in place of
the usual esoteric syntax –
“like fuck that fucking shit like fucking sucked.”

A Refrain from the arcane:
“Belie your friends with anaphora and trochaic tetrameter, only
five feet away!”

But how many stressed-unstressed stanzas form
an authentic moment of brainy thinks?
How long can we feign the fastidious
paradox before we faux pas ourselves
into the paper shredder?

In the end,
the metaphor is a volume of end rhymes and imagery
just waiting to turn on
you – the torn out pages of dramatic monologue

Observation Log 11/08/2016 – A.K.A. “Cafeteria Galaxy”

A universe of identical particleboard spheres
orbiting under the nebulous fluorescent light,
each occupied by the same cluster of fault-lined asteroids,
filling their black holes with freeze-dried gluten-free
multi-processed food matter
and expelling trivial gases about
the microscopic craters in their lives.

I spot one occasionally –
a being that goes deeper than the surface –
a solitary satellite rotating around their sphere,
minding the instruments,
ignoring the screens but
keeping an eye on the alarm system,
attempting to avert an impact.
But there are simply too many asteroids.

Observing from my station,
I lean back from the panel
and take in a deep breath of artificially-enhanced air.

When no one is trying my frequency, I can simply drift in
the wavelengths

You'll Know It When You Find It

I just can't get past the grease-blackened hands.
Be nice if I could, though – be one of the family men.
My dad and Bryan, both holding their bologna on white breads with those
same blackened hands.
Mine throbbing, jammed deep into the cherry-red '66 Mustang's ribcage,
feeling for something I don't know how to feel for.

Their minds turn the same gears – cam shafts and spark plugs.
Mine on the music – Lennon (the “soft” stuff) and Hetfield (the “loud” stuff).
I ask, again, what it is I'm trying to fix,
and in one sentence:
“You'll know it when you find it,”
my dad drains the little confidence I had left.
I toss a plea to my brother,
but my dad seals our communication:
“let him figure it out on his own.”

Face pressed against the air filter, fishing for the wrench I dropped into
its aluminum alloy muscles.
I can hear his eyes rolling.
My pounding heart echoes his tapping foot.

My fingers catch on a bolt, shaving a layer of skin off my knuckle.
“I think I found it!”
My dad's reply, skeptical, rather than pleased,
“Do you think you found it, or did you find it?”
Turning the wrench, black fluid pools around my feet
in rainbows, bright as my tie-dyed shirt.
“I knew he'd screw it up. Go fix it, Bryan.”
As my brother shifts in to salvage things, I slip out,
sealing their relationship.



Natsumi Then Shimazaki
“Cyclops Tropics and Lofticries”
Second Place, Undergraduate

UNDERGRADUATE NONFICTION

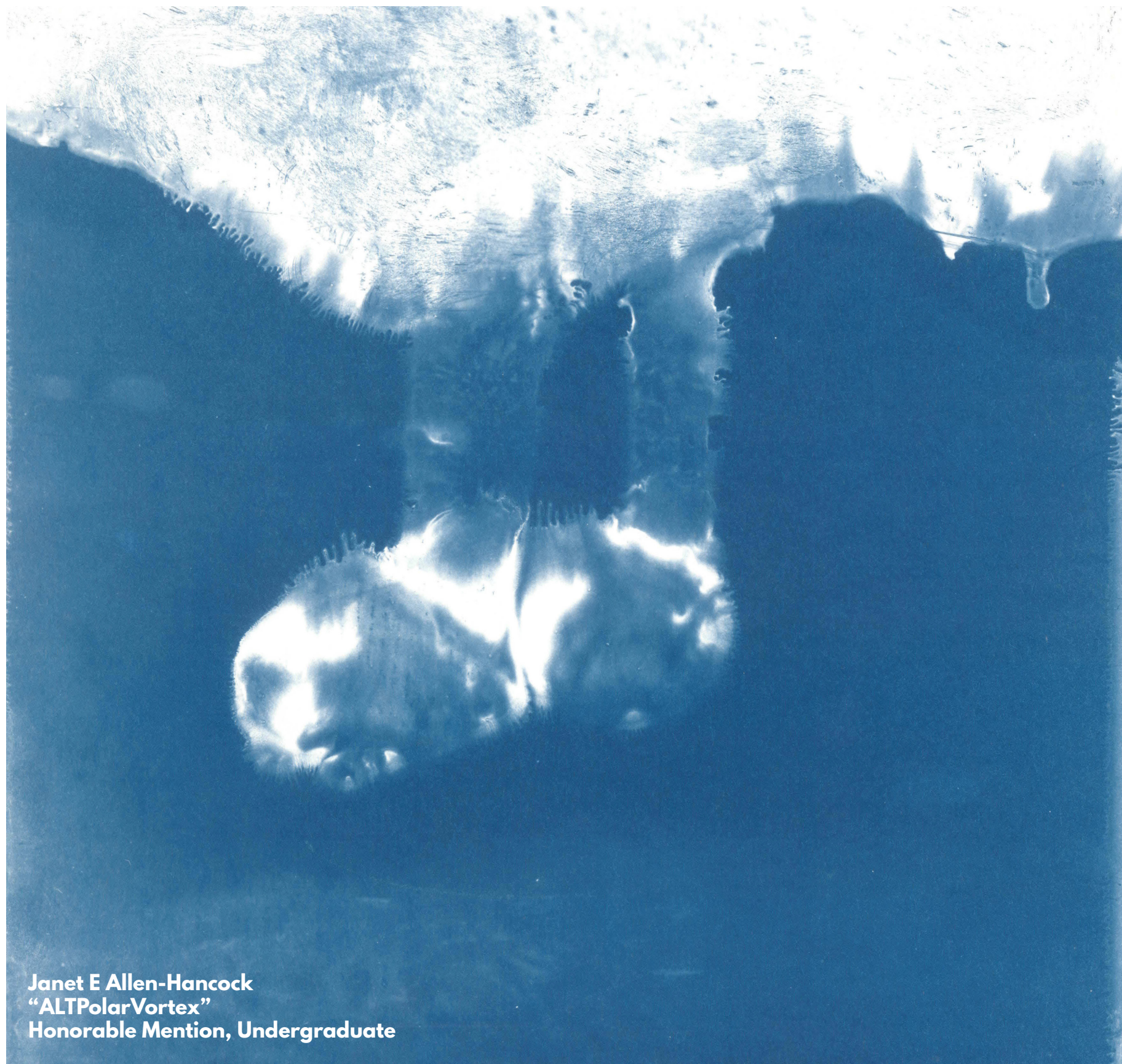
Flood

Kyle Pyfer
First Place Nonfiction
 Undergraduate

Slouching lazily, I push my newborn daughter's stroller along the pristine asphalt path atop the artificial berm where the Wallace house once stood. The adjacent river, now reduced to a mere stream, meanders peacefully below, completely separated from the ill-conceived basements of the neighboring homes it used to infiltrate every spring. This cul-de-sac changed the most since the days I spent here as a child. Houses were demolished, walls of earth were erected, and the mighty Blacksmith Fork was castrated, finally succumbing to the stubborn will of misguided, overzealous men. Even the childhood home that I now occupied felt like nothing more than a clever counterfeit of the original structure. I steal a glance into the stroller and find my daughter fast asleep. I marvel at the surreality of seeing my own image projected upon another. My multihued emerald eyes. My proud and ancient Prussian nostrils. My subtly dimpled cheek, only visible when coaxed into a truly authentic grin. She often smiles in her sleep, and I try to imagine what she could be dreaming of, having seen so little of the world. I like to think she is dreaming of me.

Throughout the early 1900's, various branches of the United States Department of Agriculture conducted detailed soil surveys in the United States and meticulously documented their findings. These later became the basis for nearly all community and agricultural planning throughout the country. Their findings included a plethora of data ranging from the ability of a soil to sustain large buildings, to potential flooding danger in any given location (nrcs.usda.gov). In the early 1990's, a small development was planned at the bottom a well-documented floodplain along the banks of the Blacksmith Fork River descending high out of the distant Bear River Range. The dangers of building in such an area were discussed, but residents and zoning committee members were reassured that with a few precautions, homes could be safely constructed. Ultimately, the plans were approved, and construction began on our street. Inexpensive land and fertile soil attracted us, and our house became the third one on the block.

The sun lapped at my freckled shoulders, leaving a blanket of throbbing, strawberry skin in its wake. Early June's whispering breeze evaporated the mixture of sweat and river water covering my back and legs, standing every follicle of hair attached to my body on edge as it whirled around me. The snow had finally disappeared from the tips of the mountains, signaling the beginning of our swimming season. "Jump, you scaredy-ass," Ryan hollered from the riverbank. He spent more and more time with the Matthews boy these days, and had curated quite the new vocabulary. Often harmless and as nonsensical as it was unpolished, it occasionally became enough to



Janet E Allen-Hancock
"ALTPolarVortex"
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate

turn a sailor's cheeks rose pink.

"I am getting ready," I croaked. That was an obvious lie, as there is no physical preparation required to jump from a tree into a river. I felt the knot in my stomach tighten as the tips of my toes clung to the bark on the outermost limb of the ancient willow. The pale blue face of the icy river below stared up at me, patiently awaiting my arrival. The more time I spent staring back, the farther away it became, and I realized I had stalled for too long—allowing the long, creeping tendrils of doubt to envelop my resolve. It was now or never, and I knew it. I swallowed hard, cried aloud to my God, and leapt. My heart sank with my body until the bottoms of my feet met the jagged stones that coated the riverbed. I felt my mouth form a smile as I slowly floated to the surface.

"Mom?" I called, crossing the threshold into the living room.

"Honey, please go grab a towel, before you ruin the carpet," Mom chastised, heading me off as I made my way towards the kitchen where something pungent and tempting, but indiscernible bubbled on the stove. I started for the hall closet, but the familiar sound of a piercing falsetto singing along to Shania Twain's "Man I Feel Like A Woman" emanating from behind the closed door of my father's study, caught my attention.

"DAD!" I yelled, throwing open the door to his office. Dad returned home from work early today and danced in his chair jovially, punching numbers into a budget spreadsheet. Startled, he shot around to greet my voice.

"Hey bud, where have you bee—oh, son, you

are soaked, go get a towel." I nodded, and flew down the hallway to acquire one. I sprinted back to Dad's office and threw myself on the floor near his feet.

"Dad, what is a 'vachina'?" I pointedly asked, wasting none of the precious time I had here with him. "Ryan told me that is what girls use to, well you know, go to the bathroom."

His eyes widened in shock, and trying to conceal a smile, he managed to sternly admonish me not to repeat things I heard from Ryan.

"Lunch is ready, Guapo," Mom tenderly called from the kitchen.

"Thanks, babe, I'll be in in just a second," Dad replied, swiveling back to face his computer. "Why don't you go eat, and I will meet you in there." I never argued when it came to mealtime, so I jumped up and sprinted into the kitchen.

I struggled to remind myself to occasionally breathe as I inhaled the refried bean and cheese burritos Mom laid on my plate as quickly as I devoured them. As Dad sauntered in, he exclaimed how disgusting it smelled. He and Mom both laughed, and he threw his arms around her waist and kissed her deeply. I imitated a vomiting noise, which Mom and Dad both ignored.

"You are sure a good lady," Dad said, resting his head on Mom's shoulder as she returned to washing the dishes in the sink.

"You are a good man, Aaron," Mom replied, leaning into his embrace.

"I hope you know I am trying to do better." Dad's tone grew more solemn this time.

"I know it. And that is why I love you." Mom turned and kissed him on the cheek. Fearing I would lose my lunch, I licked my plate (much to the consternation of my mother), threw it into the sink, and de-

parted again into the torrid June afternoon.

They arrive out of nowhere and can submerge an entire town in a matter of minutes, and according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, flash floods kill more people than hurricanes, tornadoes and lightning every year (nssl.noaa.gov). All the preparations in the world, shy of Noah's ark itself, pale in comparison to the power of an unprovoked and unexpected flood.

It rained sideways for hours. Spring came early that year and brought with it a blistering, gelid wind that made our fingers brittle as we tried to grip the heavy canvas sandbags that would create the only barrier between us and the angry river. The work was ponderous and burdensome, and our movements grew slower with each toss. Brick by brick we erected the wall, but our pace was outmatched by the sheets of water swirling about us. By the time a new layer of bags had been deposited, the tide of the flood grew to match and fill the newly created banks. Men, women, and even children stood in line, awaiting their next weight, flowing like a never-ending spring coming from the oily sand truck parked at the end of the street. But the river was clever, and knew she would eventually fall in stubborn skirmish along her banks. While our brave troops built higher, she sunk below—saturating and infiltrating the very earth beneath our feet. Fountains burst forth from the holes in our basements. Streams blossomed from the cracks in the pavement. Like the great city of Atlantis, we slowly sunk into

the depths of the deluge—inundated as punishment for the folly of our pride. Our zeal and naiveté; our eventual downfall.

“How many times do I have to tell you to turn out the damn lights?” Dad slammed the switch at the bottom of the stairs as he thundered up towards me. His pants were soaked from the knee down and covered in gray bits of the carpet that he spent the morning tearing from the basement floor. Usually tranquil and calm, Dad was in rare and destructive form today. Father's chameleon temper often mimicked his surroundings, and I could see a squall raging behind his emerald eyes.

“I am sorry, I was in a hurry,” I sheepishly mumbled, knowing full well that I had simply forgotten. You idiot, of all days to forget, I silently self-rebuked.

“How about you start paying for the utility bill for a few months? Maybe then you'd remember to shut them off. It just doesn't seem to get through to you,” he continued. Dad had gotten close enough now that I could smell the impatience on his breath.

“I'm sorry.” I lowered my eyes and got out of his way. He shook his head and blew past me towards his room at the end of the hall. I heard the bedroom door open and slam shut again.

Feeling chagrined, I pounded down the stairs towards my own room. My youngest brother Layne, with whom I shared a bunk, had sprawled out on the cold and now barren floor and was busy mashing the buttons on my clear purple Gameboy. He started as he heard me enter, quickly trying to conceal the handset from my view behind his back.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to

use my stuff?" I barked menacingly, grabbing the console out of his hand.

"I'm sorry, I forgot to ask, but mine is dead. Just let me save my game." He reached to take it back.

"No, you are done." I pushed him, and he stumbled backwards.

"What the heck, Kyle?" He shoved back harder, sending me instead. My rage quickly rose until it overcame its banks.

"You little bitch!" I shoved him hard. Too hard. He flew back into the dresser with a crash, sending books and clothes cascading on top of him. He sat motionless for a moment before letting out a faint cry. Large tears formed at the edges of his eyes, and rained down his cheeks. Instant remorse clutched my throat, but before I could utter an apology, he sprung into action and with a vengeance I had not yet seen, he lunged at me knocking me back into the opposite wall. All feelings of regret vanished, and adrenaline assumed its place. Before I could think, my balled fist connected with the bridge of his nose. He stumbled, unbelieving. In the decade we had lived together as brothers, never once had I hit him. I had crossed a line that could not be uncrossed. The strength of my anger departed, and my gut filled with fear. I watched this realization cross his face, and seized the opportunity to make my move. I dashed through the still open door and up the stairs, violent screams and hurried footsteps following close behind me, but what I found at the top of the stairs, however, harrowed me far more greatly.

"He...h-he hit me, Dad!" Layne sobbed uncontrollably now, his body heaving with fury. I quickly realized I had no defense. I acted out of a rage unfamiliar to me, as if someone poisoned me with anger in small doses, and I finally succumbed to its effects.

"Is that true? Did you hit him?" Said my father, his voice cold and threatening.

"He was playing my game and wouldn't give it back." I immediately wished I could retract this flimsy excuse.

"You hit your brother over a video game?" I nodded my head, and before I could blink, what felt like a poorly aimed sandbag slammed into my chest, stealing the air from my lungs. I tried to cry, but the air had not yet returned to me. I stumbled to find the couch so I could sit down, still gasping for a breath that would not come. Mom had entered the room, alerted by the sounds of the fracas and watched my father lower his clenched fist. "Do you like how that feels?!" his booming voice rang in my ears.

"Aaron!" Mom grabbed him by the arm. Still unable to cry, I shook my head in desperation.

"Go to your room," he ordered, still unphased by Mom's presence. I stumbled down the stairs as fast as my legs would carry me, and as I lay in bed crying, I could hear muffled shouts coming from the ceiling above. "Why do you always stand up for him?" and "Because you were out of control!" hurled themselves from opposite ends of the room. Eventually these voices were drowned by the cacophony of the storm outside, and as the sun set through my window, and my bedroom darkened, I slowly drifted to sleep.

The first seeds of human civilization sprang from the banks of treacherous rivers. Nestled in the crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates, the Sumerian people set up shop for better or for worse. Annual flooding often vexed inhabitants with the constant fear of death and destruction, but also brought the



Hailey Cragun
"Brush Curve"
Third Place, Graduate

promise of fertile soil and unimaginable prosperity. Early man knew of the risks involved, but they also knew that the greatest risks often accompanied the sweetest rewards. Eventually, the empire of Sumer learned to harness the river and use the floods to build a kingdom that thrived for over a thousand years. Incidentally and ironically, this would also become their downfall, as rising salinity levels in the soil caused by flood irrigation drove the people from the area, and

captive into Babylon (crf-usa.org). Loving a river has always been fraught with peril, but more often than not, as history can attest, proved itself a venture worth the trouble.

Katelin and I only dated a month, but clearly an impending nuptial was inevitable. We were smitten,

and found home in each other's company. However, my carefully crafted facade of placidity and congeniality still presented itself as a barrier between our fairytale courtship and reality. I spent years expending every resource available to prevent myself from becoming my father, but every time I flew off the handle and lost control, I resolved that these efforts were futile. She knew me in my summer—calm and serene—but if we married, she would eventually learn of my tumultuous spring. Fairness dictated I warn her of the danger, so we drove to the spot where we first kissed only weeks before on a mild October evening.

"Listen, Kate," I began, putting the car into park and turning off the engine. "I am not who you think I am." She couldn't resist laughing at this melodramatic declaration, and I straightened indignantly in my seat. "I hope you didn't bring me all the way out here to tell me you are a secret agent or something." I tried to posture in annoyance, but her smile dissolved my austere shell.

"I am serious," I said, far less seriously. "I am not the 'Mr. Nice Guy' that you think I am."

"What do you mean?" She appeared more inquisitive now.

"I mean, I have issues. I am depressed all the time. I get mad, babe. Really mad. I take meds it gets so bad. I guess it runs in my genes. My dad was like this growing up, and I must have inherited it from him. Honestly, I wonder why my mom has stuck around all these years."

"She probably sees in your Dad what I see in you. She married him for a reason, and she has built a life with him for a reason." She shifted in her seat to face me, and rested her hand on mine. "Let me ask you a question. Let's say we were married." I started to blush. "And we have a house. One day, a pipe breaks

and floods the basement, ruining the carpet and the furniture. What do we do? Do we sell the house and move? Do we tear the whole thing down and start over? No. We replace the carpet and the furniture, and fix the pipe. Even if our basement flooded a thousand times, we would keep trying to fix it. Because some things—and some people," she leaned in closer, "are just worth it." She kissed me softly on the cheek.

"I love you, Kate."

"I love you, too."

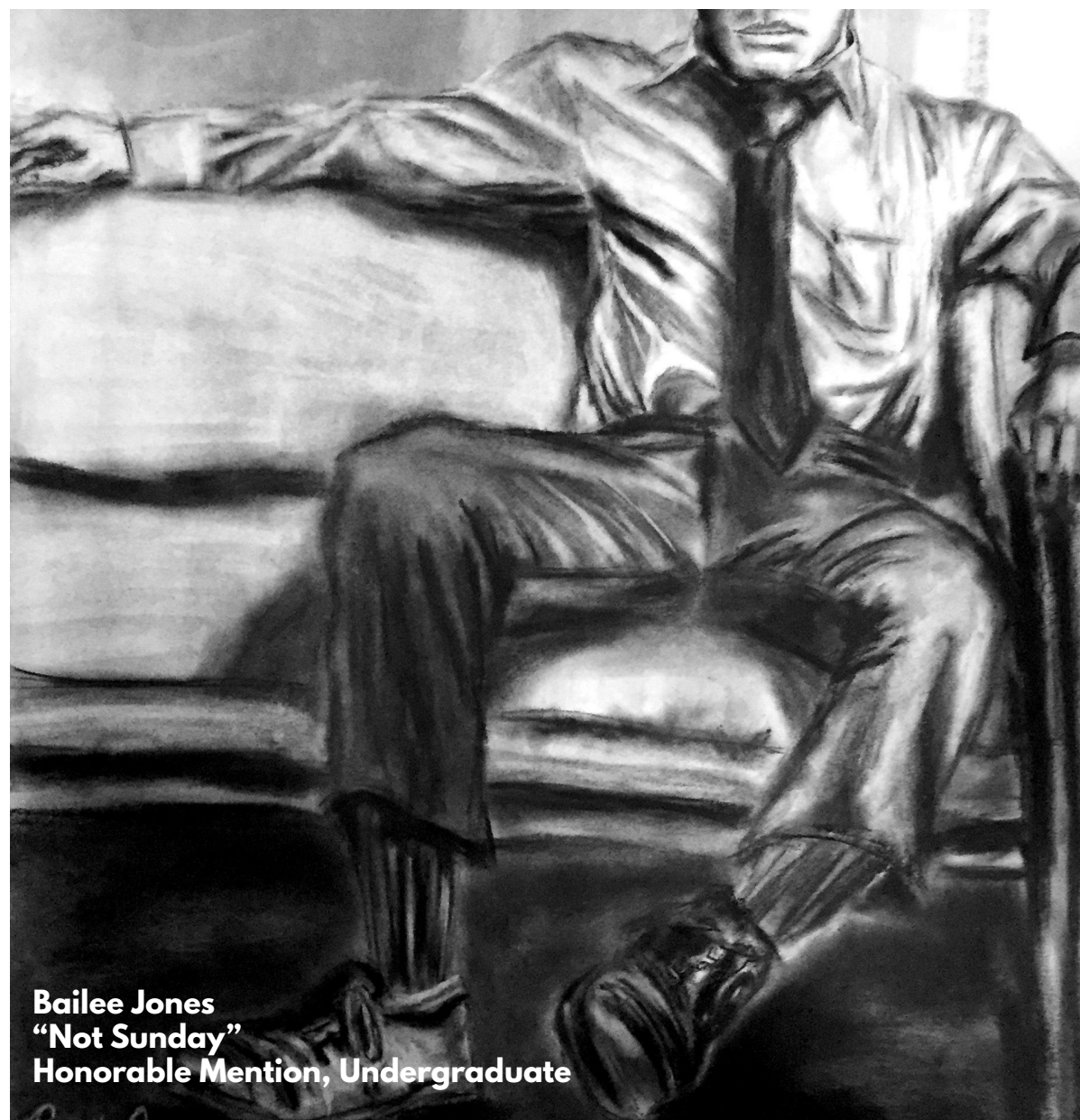
My parents are back in town to see the new baby. They recently moved south to be closer to new employment and schooling opportunities. I stifle a laugh as Dad tries desperately to coax a smile from his granddaughter. I marvel at the surreality of seeing my own image, worn and faded, on the once-youthful face of the man who held me like that as an infant. My firm brow, infinitely furled in concentration and delight. My narrow and divided chin. My contagious laugh and charming smile. Age tamed him, and no longer wild and unpredictable, he meandered like a mild mannered alpine stream. Over the years I learned to forgive him for the messes he made and the damage he caused, building up a berm of my own for protection. But as the river ran its course, and I separated myself from it, I found it easier to love and remember fondly again. Some floorboards had been permanently stained but finally, fresh carpet adorned the ground once more. ●

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Genesis 1:26

Justin Smith
Second Place Nonfiction
Undergraduate

I WOULD SOMETIMES WANDER barefoot through the freshly tilled potato fields around my house just after they were seeded in early spring. I would try to imagine the rolling emptiness around me as a sea floor. I would try to detect volcanic rumblings through my numb feet. I would listen closely for the voice of God, and could stare in any direction and feel as small as the un-nameable trillions of His creations panicking in the newly ravaged world below my soles. Any cloud shadow sweeping across the fields could be the foot of God under which, I imagined, Lyman would kneel and sing hymns in praise of its mercy.

Not long after the fields were seeded each spring, the eastward snowpack would thaw and a flash flood would rip through the unsprouted fields not one mile north of my father's house. The flood would persist for about a week, waxing then waning along a normal distribution relative to the ferocity of the previous winter. We prayed for ferocious winters, and we celebrated this annual flush from the east.

The flood gathered into a river as it approached the lip of the bench, eventually surging through a deep ravine that served as a land boundary between the Wilcox's and the Ricks's property. It then shot

through an igneous spout and rained down upon the valley below. I knew this spout well. It gorged into the edge of the bench and exposed a vertical face of about thirty feet. I squirreled through its cracks and caves all summer long, camouflaging forts into rock outcrops and caching found treasures under the roots of junipers. I stalked fox, porcupine, and pronghorn. I knew every stick could be a snake.

Plants, like people, survive in Lyman by way of conservation. Juniper, sage, cactus, scrub grasses—nothing flamboyant. In the rocky basin below the runoff spout, though, stood one glorious cottonwood. This was the only deciduous tree in my world, and I loved it. It was home base, capital city, oasis. I hid from ghosts in its branches. I cursed all of the names carved into its trunk and kept a hammer hidden nearby to destroy any beginnings of tree houses.

I would have liked to be at its base when God's foot came crashing down.

When Max the Dalmatian limped home with a broken spine, my father took me to the cow pasture to watch him end his suffering. I was six years old.

When Kent Sutton's boar knocked through his wire-paneled pen and visited my paternal grandfather's sow, she had a litter of thirteen. When they were four weeks old, my father told me to catch and straddle the eight young boars while he cut out their testicles with a flame-hot razor blade. I was eight years old.

When my mother ran over half of the stray cat that squatted in our garage, she handed me the shovel and told me to finish the job. I was ten years old.

But when we found Velma the old mare tangled in a barbed wire fence one August night after baseball practice, limp from blood loss and missing an eyeball from thrashing, my father called my maternal

grandfather to finish the job. Velma was arthritic and balding, more than double my age. My father gave me a pair of pincers to cut her loose from the twisted web of a fence. She stood up before the job was done and immediately fell back into blood-hard dirt, more ensnared than before. We thought she might die before my grandfather arrived with the shotgun. I saw my father cry when Velma sprang free and tripped toward the shade of the one apple tree in his father's backyard.

I want to believe that my maternal grandfather has love somewhere in his heart, but he certainly shows none to animals. Maybe twenty years of dairy farming froze it out of him. I once saw him drive a pitchfork into a stubborn cow that wouldn't be loaded into its trailer. I once saw him whip a garden snake that crawled out of his basement against the exterior of his house. I checked on the spray of blood that stained into the grey stucco for years each time I visited.

The barrel of his shotgun wasn't three feet from Velma's skull when he pulled the trigger. "Need to borrow my forks?" he said.

"Dad's little Case still has forks," my father said.

"Alright then." He wiped the barrel off with his shirt sleeves as he walked back to his Chevy, still running.

I stood on the back weights of the little Case tractor while my father loaded Velma's body onto its forks. We rumbled down the Archer-Lyman highway with Velma's drooping corpse balanced on the lifted fork, then up onto the bench and to the gorge. Father looked northward while he lowered the forks, but I looked straight ahead. I didn't go back to the gorge until the next spring.

I SOMETIMES DREAMT that a black mist stalked me through the potato fields and chased me around the lip of the gorge. It was a sudden terror inspired by the vastness of the sky. It was a collapse inside myself at the thought of God's foot crashing down onto the valley. It was what shut my mouth for the rest of the day after I watched Velma's body flop end-over-end down the spout of the gorge before rolling to rest under the arms of my cottonwood.

If my maternal grandfather does indeed have love left in his heart, he shows it through gift giving. As I approached puberty, his birthday gifts increased in lethality: pocket knife, sling shot, bb gun, pellet gun, crossbow. I showcased the arsenal in my bedroom closet, but did not use them as anything more than fashion accessories while I was Indiana Jones.

The winter after my mother refused to allow me a .22 as a birthday present from her father, I began to wrestle with the devil each night as I kneeled in bedside prayer.

I developed a recurring nightmare. I was a rider on the back of a black horse, running with a stampede of black horses that stretched to each horizon. I wore a black cloak, and we rode through clouds of mist that occasionally thinned, allowing me to look out over the sea of black bodies. The dream always began euphorically—how spectacular it felt to be so alive!

Invariably, though, in the thinner patches of fog, I would begin to see the edge of the stampede. As we rode on, the edge grew nearer and nearer, until the outermost horses were in clear focus. Then I understood: the outermost horses decayed as they ran. Our stampede was consuming itself. First their skin ripped away in the wind of their gallop, then their insides dislodged and spilled around their galloping hooves until they were merely skeletons run-

Chris Davis
"Forest Focus"
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate



ning through blackness and mist. The bones turned to chalk dust and they crashed into piles of dust, then the process began again on the next-closest beast.

Eventually, I rode alone over a black frontier on a decaying horse. I would struggle to stop the horse, screaming out and pulling its reins uselessly. I would scream myself awake, panicked and sometimes crying, the image of my own body beginning to decay, feet first, fresh in my brain.

THAT WINTER WAS FEROCIOUS. Dunes of snow crawled across the fields. My father and I drove his father's little Case up the bench to clear a single-lane path down the bench most mornings. The whiteness of the land blurred into an obscure horizon during the day and cut an indisputable boundary with the blackness of night.

One Sunday morning in January, a fox laid dead in our garage. We found it while we were loading into the car to go to church.

"Mange," my father said. "Mel Mortenson said he's found three the same way in his barn. Looks like they're all dying this winter."

It looked like it had been in a fight. Only patches of fur remained

on its clawed-marked pink hide. It had half a tail, and black trails crawled from its ears to its nose to its eyes.

“You guys go ahead. You shouldn’t be late,” my father told my mother. Then he and I scooped the body into a snow shovel and cleared enough snow behind the propane tank to lay the fox against the cold ground, then covered it with a mound of snow.

BY FEBRUARY, my circadian rhythm was backward. Rather than sleep, I read the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants from beginning to end. I dozed through the day and missed so many classes that my mother took me to a pediatrician, then a neurologist, then a homeopath, then a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist prescribed an anti-depressant, an anti-inflammatory, a sleeping pill, and a pain pill.

I dreamed and prayed through March. The black mist haunted me by day and settled into me by night. The nightmares continued.

One day while the snow was crystallizing under the new spring sun, Father was helping my maternal grandfather tear down a shed and chop the beams into firewood. They told me to stand away from the spinning saw connected to the back rotary of the Case. The blade screamed like a dying rabbit. I wandered away into the labyrinth of hand-built outbuildings and abandoned rusting farm implements that was my maternal grandfather’s dairy farm.

I walked underneath grain augers as big as brontosauruses. I filled my jeans with rusted bottle caps and dropped tools. I smelled molding feed, snow-damp plywood, thawing manure pits.

It was snake season. My mother’s father’s house filled with snakes every spring. They bred in hidden pockets in the depths of the crawl spaces, then slithered out of air vents and cracks in the foundation and

into the swamp of acreage around the dairy farm. This is precisely why it was a dairy farm: the lowest point in the valley, crops could only drown and mold.

But I wasn’t thinking about snakes. I was looking for treasure. Lifting rotted two-by-fours and old tin sheets revealed gopher tunnels and mud canvases embossed with the detritus of October. Sometimes I’d find skeletons of mice; sometimes I’d find artifacts from my grandfather’s past.

I flipped over an overturned trough and discovered chaos. A ball of water snakes sucked over, into, and through one another, somehow slower and faster than time. They did not notice that I watched. This was everything: an orgy; a source. I lost myself as I watched the metallic sheen of their scales bend in the cold, fading light. They reeked somewhere between the world of urine and perfume. It was a planet. It was a spiral.

They scared me. For a moment, I considered crushing them under my boot; stamping their alien bodies into a pulp. But I didn’t. Neither did I blink.

“Where’d you get off to?” my father asked later.

“Nowhere,” I said. “I mean I don’t know.”

FATHER WAS RIGHT. It seemed as if all of the foxes had died, since the gorge was crawling with hares.

I was terrified of finding Velma’s skeleton around the cottonwood, so I explored cautiously. But it seemed as if nothing was left.

It was still early spring. Drifts of snow lurked in shadows and crevices, and the grey-green junipers looked over-saturated without the white canvas on the ground to throw back the sunlight. I sat on a rock next to some optimistic cacti already sporting yellow blooms.

It felt good to be outside, to shiver in the sun-

light. I was skinnier than ever. Some of the scrub grass was beginning to stand back up, freed from the weight of the months-long snowdrifts, and I could see tiny green leaves dancing in the cool wind on my cottonwood in the basin below. I didn't mind my knees knocking together. I had a purpose.

I held my pellet gun across my lap. Father said that I should get out of my room and get some fresh air. "I don't know how you expect to feel better if you stay in bed all day," he'd said. We didn't tell father about the psychiatrist at first, but he knew about the pills, although we never talked about it.

I had had a dream in which father and I were hunting together—something we'd never done. He shot an arrow into a bull elk's leg and, as it ran startled into the brush, I downed it with an arrow through the neck. Father hugged me and we ran to strip our kill and I felt ecstatic love. I took it as a symbol.

I was here to kill a hare—also something I'd never done. I picked up the pellet gun and crouched around through the sage. When I stomped around, hares would dash from their hiding spots, crazy to find safety. It was impossible to aim while they ran, though. I had to spot one before it was spooked.

There it was. A pulse of fur with a white bob-tail under the roots of a juniper. There was nowhere it could go.

I kneeled behind some sage and steadied the barrel of my gun between its branches. I heard the click of the trigger, the poof of compressed air, and the thud of the pellet into the hare. But the hare did not collapse like the dream-elk had.

It jumped straight upward, as if ejected from the root system. It hit the ground gracelessly, righted itself, and kicked the air with its whole body before finding the ground and shooting off in a wide, right

leaning arc. I dropped my gun and ran out from behind the sage. The hare burst through the grass. One back leg kicked violently as it ran, but the other dragged in the wet ground, tracing a path of orbit around me. I turned clockwise while I watched it. The one black eye facing me was terrifying, and I knew what I had to do.

I ran to retrieve my gun from behind the sage, then took a few shots, but it was useless. There was no way I was going to hit it while it ran. Then my body seemed to take command, and I rushed to a point on the circle it traced and trapped the panting creature under my sneaker. Its mouth wheezed and I could see the pink of its tongue as I cocked the gun again and put a pellet into its brain.

I sat cross-legged next to the hot, still body and felt nothing more deeply than ever before. I began to pray, then I began to cry. I cried so hard that I stopped praying. I dug my hands into the cold earth and sobbed until my shirtfront was as wet as the ground on which I sat.

I felt warm or numb when my tears ended. I used my gun like a cane to stand up, and drug the barrel in the field behind me as I trudged home. Everything felt fuzzy.

Between home and the gorge, in the middle of a frost-burned potato field, I stopped and looked around at the landscape that surrounded me. I stood in the riverbed that would guide next month's flood off of the bench and into the valley below. The sun was beginning to dip below the volcanic buttes to the west, and I watched shadows close within the ravine behind me. The sky seemed so large and so empty.

I inhaled as much of the cold air as my lungs could hold, then lifted my arms slightly from my side as I exhaled everything inside, stuttering toward the

end and losing a few leftover tears. I kept my lungs empty as long as I could manage, then finished walking home, leaving my pellet gun on the spot.

THE RUNOFF THAT year was tremendously fierce. The north side of the spout collapsed under its force, and boulders spilled down in piles against my cottonwood. Father and I stood and watched it rage one day while on our way to pick up a disc for the tractor to plow a field behind my uncle's house that we intended to seed that year.

"Looks like the Lord heard our prayers for water," Father said.

"I guess so," I said.

We looked out over the greening valley together for a while, and then walked back to the running tractor. We drove along the edge of the bench for a ways until we came to the spot where we kept the disc. I jumped out and guided father back as he drove the old Case in reverse. I threw my arms up for "Stop," when he was close enough to hitch on, but then realized that the tongue was missing its pin.

"Garth said he might borrow it this morning. He must've driven off with it," father said. "I might have another one in the cab somewhere."

While he searched, I sat on the disc with my feet on one of the blades. Then I saw it—a rattlesnake, whipping violently under my feet.

I jumped off the disc and stepped back a few paces, but the snake didn't follow. It also didn't rattle. I crept closer and realized that its back end was stuck under the weight of the disk. Garth must have lowered the disk on top of it this morning. Its fierce black eyes were locked onto me, but my heart rate slowed and I looked closer. The way it threw its whole body at me—mouth agape, over and over, was hypnotizing

and beautiful. I wondered how long it had been stuck and if it was afraid of dying.

"Found one," Father said. He slid in the pin, uncurious about my distraction. "Let's go."

I climbed on to my perch on the back weights of the tractor, but watched over my shoulder as the disc raised and we started moving. I couldn't see the snake as we drove away, but I smiled at the thought of it slithering away into the safety of the rocks and junipers and sage, freed from the weight that almost crushed it. The roar of the distant flood, the knock of the old Case's engine, and the sight of a gigantic cumulus front racing toward us from the west made me feel tiny.

I wondered if the snake ever felt this tiny. I held on to my father's shoulders as we rumbled along.

"Hey, dad," I said, "What are we doing after we finish with the disc?"

"Your mom said we might go down to Grandpa's place and have some cake. It's his birthday."

"Will we finish in time?"

"We'll see. No promises."

"Okay," I said. "No promises." ●

Pieces of Girl: Black Knot, Blood Clot

Millie Tullis
*Third Place Nonfiction
Undergraduate*

"I shall never get you put together entirely
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed."
- Sylvia Plath, "The Colossus"

Plath, Sylvia. The Colossus. Vintage Books, 1957.

PLATH'S FIRST collection of poetry and the only book she saw published was *The Colossus*. The book received mixed reviews. While the work showed Plath's careful and controlled language, the poems hardly stood out from other work being produced by modernist poets.

After I read "Daddy," I looked for more Plath at the public library. All I knew was her name, which I typed into one of the library computers. I chose *The*

Colossus over *Ariel* (as the local library had both) because the title sounded more interesting. The only *Ariel* I knew was the mermaid. I didn't know much about colossuses.

I remember clinging to a few things when I read it; in "The Manor Garden" she called pears fat "little buddhas" (3). "All the Dead Dears" was inspired by the Archaeological Museum in Cambridge. It has a coffin from the fourth century "containing the skeletons of a woman, a mouse and a shrew. The ankle-bone of the woman has been slightly gnawn" (29). I thought about the ankle-bone a lot. Bones are what are left over. I thought about what the term "left over" implies— that something is gone. Some "self" ness has left. Surely there is something other than the bones that get gnawn down to salt. Left overs.

I suppose I was always taught a kind of Dualist Christianity: a real body-separate-from-soul philosophy. Once in Sunday school, my teacher put on a white cotton glove and wiggled her fingers around in it. She asked us if the glove was the one doing the wiggling. We said no— without the hand the glove was nothing, a shell. "The glove is like our body. It's just a covering, a house for our spirits. Our spirit is what animates it, the spirit is us." This made sense to me. I was happy to know that my personality would continue long after my death, and I never paid much attention to how my body grew or changed or touched. I saw no place where they— the real "me" and the physical thing bumping around— could connect.

I wasn't worried or consoled about an eventual resurrection I was told I was promised. The idea of being resurrected always got me turned around, so I generally avoided thinking about it: What age would I be? Could I fix my hair? Would my teeth be before or after braces? If my body was perfected, would it

Natsumi Then Shimazaki
“Blending in Nature: Natural and
Urban Coalescence”
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate



still be mine? I didn't care much one way or another if God gave my body back.

Mom always joked that I was her clumsiest child—the least aware of my body. I was always mismeasuring how much space I took up and bumping into things, doorways, table edges. Whenever one of mother's ceramic plates or bowls or mugs were broken, my family assumed I did it. I would forget I was holding things, sometimes, or forget how much space they took up, or they would just slip through my fingers just before reaching the counter top where I as-

sumed I was putting them.

I was always getting scabs too. Not because I was brave—I was timid. But I always had some scab along my elbow or chin or forehead or knee from being a klutz. I was a notoriously bad picker of scabs. I loved the way the fleshy cap of a scab lifted off, and I craved the way the skin or blood underneath looked cleaner, more vibrant, more colored. Certainly this, this bright red or fleshier pink was a layer closer to whatever was underneath—

Anyone close to me has gotten after me for pick-

ing at my skin for as long as I can remember. From the time I was a little girl, my mother warned me that I would be covered in scars if I kept picking and then I would wind up ugly and then what would I do? I couldn't have cared less if I ended up ugly. It seemed a small price to pay for all the pleasure releasing the scabs gave me.

When I grew up, the picking didn't stop, it only changed locations. I would pick at my face when I got zits as a teenager. By the time I was in college, my skin was too clear to be reliable so I began tearing and biting at my lips, especially my full bottom lip. Lip-picking gives a particular kind of pleasure because it's so painful: a tiny rush. And it bleeds, but it's easy to hide. Your lip was already a nice pink, and you can suck your lip without anyone really noticing. You can be anywhere at all and your lip will be bleeding and no one will think anything of you sucking it. But tearing up my lips made me feel strange when boys wanted to kiss me because, if they noticed, how could I explain? So I started wearing lipstick—good, thick matte lipstick—because it would look ridiculous if I chewed it off (although I sometimes still did, leaving behind the bright color only around the edges). But then I just attacked the skin around my nails. Anything that looked imperfect got ripped right off, or any invisible bit of skin I could feel would be pulled at until it managed to lift up. And this was better because my hands were hardly my best feature, already having a few scars from childhood, but also worse because people notice your finger is bleeding. They think you must not have noticed. “Oh it's nothing... nervous habit.”

It was the worst when I was nineteen. After my sister gave me one of her cat's kittens if I promised not to drink any more— not until I was twenty-one—promised to be more careful. Like what the sergeant

said after the case didn't go through for lack of evidence, for the surplus of conservatism in our community, for having not stopped it sooner, for having been drunk. He told me it almost always happened with drinking, try to be more careful next time. It was my house and my bed but my body had put itself there so we should try to be more careful—

The kitten slept in my bed, under my arm, under the blankets. But he was a kitten; he would swat at my hands occasionally and leave little cuts of raised skin that itched. I irritated and widened and picked the thin wounds, two on each hands, for months, a spring and a summer. They become large and constantly looked bloody. My picking had never been this bad before.

By fall, they were starting to heal. I was sleeping better. A boy I had dated in high school came home from a Mormon mission and wanted to take me on a date. I said no, but offered to meet up for a bagel on one of the first days of school. He was attending my university, and it was his first year. I wore a hat and lipstick and long sleeves but they weren't long enough— when I reached for a knife to spread my cream cheese he said, “Oh my gosh, what happened? It looks like your hands went through a meat grinder.” I flinched.

“Nervous habit.”

People don't like to see you bleeding. They think something is wrong.

Plath, Sylvia. The Collected Poems. HarperCollins, 1981.

EDITED BY Ted Hughes and published posthumously, *The Collected Poems* won Plath the Pulitzer Prize. Hughes included very few earlier published poems— few poems during her years at Smith, as these seemed

to be her still “finding her voice.” He writes, “her evolution as a poet went rapidly through successive bouts of style, as she realized her true matter and voice... she seemed to shed a style.” (16).

Plath, Sylvia. “Cut” *Ariel*. HarperCollins, 1965.

THIS POEM came from an experience where Plath cut herself cooking. The power of this poem is its simple language and clean visual imagery. It opens with the action. She calls the cut, “a thrill / My thumb instead of an onion.” (13) The blood comes out like “Carpet rolls // Straight from the heart.” (13) It is “A celebration,” a bottle of champagne. Then the speaker starts to feel weak. “The thin / Papery feeling.” (14) The poem becomes stranger,

The balled
Pulp of your heart
Confronts its small
Mill of silence (14)

The poem ends on her holding her wound. “Dirty girl, / Thumb stump.”

Plath, Sylvia. “Fever 103” *Ariel*. HarperCollins, 1965.

Perhaps more so than any other poem of Plath’s, “Fever 103” deals with burning as a form of purification. It was written after Plath was ill, feverish, and hallucinatory. Note what the speaker identifies with. She calls herself first a lantern, emitting “heat” and “light”. She rises, spouting beads of “hot metal,” becoming more the virgin, less of a self, perfected.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Random House, 1982.

WHEN THE JOURNALS of Sylvia Plath was first published it was heavily edited down from the available material by Ted Hughes. He writes in the introduction to the book that there were several reasons for paring down the material. For instance, all of her early writing “suffered from her ambition to see her work published” (xi).

Yet, he also justifies his selection because she went through stages of writing so quickly that her journals were often confusing. Hughes describes Plath as being creatively obsessive yet too quickly evolving for her to ever be pleased with what she produced. It was as if she changed too quickly. “She showed something violent in this, something very primitive, perhaps very female, a readiness, even a need, to sacrifice everything to the new birth” (xi).

He writes that she was constantly laboring to kill her old self for “the birth of a new real one” (xii, my italics). Everything he did not include in the book was merely a “waste produce of [her voice’s] gestation” (xii). He marked the places her voice began to breakthrough and claims that, just before her death, she was fully herself— when she was writing the poems for *Ariel*. This was when “her real self, being the real poet, would now speak for itself, and would throw off all those lesser and artificial selves that had monopolized the words up to that point, it was as if a dumb person suddenly spoke” (xii).

Before this poem, Plath was one poet. After this poem, she became another poet. Rebirth. Transformation through labor. Peeling away the dead skin and getting to something shinier underneath. Here she is— becoming herself— in the introduction, Hughes says the value and purpose of her journal is to watch Plath’s “unmaking and remaking of herself” (xiii).

Plath, Sylvia. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. Random House, 2000.

WHEN PLATH'S *Unabridged Journals* were at last published in their entirety, Joyce Carol Oates called it "a literary event." Plath was declared the "diarist of our time" and many critics remarked that Plath put herself on the page better than any biographer could. After all, all biographies are necessarily constricted to the author's interests and goals, beliefs and theories. An autobiography through the study of another. Plath was called "a powerful transitional figure" in her journals. Maybe her most real self was in the changing.

Plath's entire collection of available journals (what was published here) are not all of the journals that she kept. It has long been a hot topic among Plath critics that Hughes destroyed her last journal (he claimed that it was something too painful for her children to ever have to read) and "misplaced" a few others. These "lost journals" did not show up after his death in 1998, when his children, Freida and Nicholas, took over the rights to Plath's work. Furthermore, two of the journals published in *The Unabridged Journals* were only unsealed by Hughes just before his death and were not previously available to researchers. These journals covered the years 1957-1959, when Hughes and Plath were living in the United States and when they moved back to England. These journals take up almost half of the volume.

Plath's journals are not only important because of the mystery of the gaps—the "missing" journals. These journals offer the reader a personal record of her inner thoughts, feelings, and fears, but they were also a place where she wrote about her writing. Many of the passages are full of details she wants to remem-

ber for a story, novel, or poem later. These are often taken from her real life, or those she meets. Her obsession with the details of life suggests that she is always storing up moments, in case she should need them later; she was storing versions and memories of herself to use in her art. Sometimes her entries are only one long list. In these entries, she sounds like a madwoman, trying not to forget the details she needs for this or that idea; everything was useful to Plath as a writer. She loved the thinginess of things. "This is life; material;" (41). Here is one example of notes for a story from an undated entry (around 1957):

Moor setting - walk to Haworth, to Wuthering Heights - physical, rich, heavy-booted detail - blisters, grouse - picnic - honey soaking through brown paper bag - fear, aloneness - goal - cairn of black stones, small, contracted - their dream of each other, she & he - Elly & red-headed artist - strength of Elly? Strength - each alone - bracken, marsh - tea in deep cleft of valley - dark, cats - story of lost woman - match-flare of courage in the dark - moor sheep - bus-wait opposite spiritualists... (302).

Most of these notes were never made into a finished product. But the reader gets the feeling that Plath's urgency in these passages comes from an intense passion for life, details, people, and things. She is so urgent she seems almost fearful, desperate; she saw everything as material, opportunity that she could so easily miss.

Plath's young insecurities as a writer are centered on her own limited narrative. Over and over again in her journals, Plath wrote that that she longed to be God because she could be a more powerful creative force if she could escape her own subjectivity. She even calls him her alter-ego, "God, how I love it all. And who am I, God-whom-I-don't-believe-in?"

God-who-is-my-alter-ego?" (91). A shadow of omnipotence is what fiction offers her— other voices, other selves to understand. Creating new selves.

Perhaps that's why I want to be everyone— so no one can blame me for being I... the v e r y content that comes from finding yourself is overshadowed by the knowledge that by doing so you are admitting you are not only a grotesque, but a special kind of grotesque (44).

At twenty, she is "a victim of introspection" (76): "If I have not the power to put myself in the place of other people, but must be continually burrowing inward, I shall never be the magnanimous creative person I wish to be" (76). If she could be omnipotent, she could be the ultimate creative force. She could see and speak as everyone, yet— paradoxically— her limited perspective is what her work is born out of. Themes, images and ideas from Plath's journal are visible in her later serious work. "This is life; material;" (41).

Perhaps not surprisingly, the "I" in Plath's journal often sounds like her characters in fiction and poetry. For example, when you read *The Bell Jar* and her 1950-1953 journal side by side, you can see that Esther is plagued by the same self-doubt that Plath was. Compare the journal passage from her freshman year at Smith College (late 1950 or early 1951) where she obsesses about the letter "I" in regards to herself:

How do I know? I don't; I can only guess. I wouldn't be I. But I am I now; and so many other millions are so irretrievably their own special variety of "I" that I can hardly bear to think of it. I: how firm a letter, how reassuring the three strokes: one vertical, proud and assertive, and then the two short horizontal lines in quick, smug succession. the pen scratches on the paper... I ... I ... I ... I ... I ... I. (34)

to what Esther says in *The Bell Jar*: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (30). Both women seem to be convincing themselves of their existence, of their "I" as something solid, something that can be written on paper and remain for generations. Something another "I" can come by and pick up later. Can read, and understand; can think, I know her I. I have one too. In these passages, they are trying to convince themselves that their letter means something, that it holds them, stabilizes. Here, they are resisting re-creation of self, and change, instability. Plath constantly tries to define this "I" in her journal but it seems to move too quickly for her; "I scarcely know who I am, much less who anyone else is." (76) "...wondering always who am I? Who is this girl I hear talking?" (96).

Plath doubts that there even is an "I" if an "I" means an essential, eternal soul. In 1951 she writes, "You don't believe in God, or life-after-death, so you can't hope for sugar plums when your non-existent soul rises" (63). But if there isn't a self, or if the self can be divided, how can we reconcile our first person narrative? What do we mean when we say "I?" If she can't speak or think in first person, she can't say anything. Her own perception is all she knows, and she doubts even that. Here she addresses herself in second person: "...somewhere along the thin, tenuous thread of your existence there is the black knot, the blood clot, the stopped heartbeat that spells the end of this particular individual which is spelled 'I' and 'You' and 'Sylvia.'" (63).

PLATH RECOGNIZED these many voices and asks in her journal, "How can you be so many women to so many people, oh you strange girl?" which I read that spring, when I was not-quite-nineteen, when I

was starting to read all of the Plath biographies, and I put the lines that stuck out to me on sticky notes and placed them above my desk with other quotes I collected, words I considered sticking permanently onto my body, my new scriptures (137). Half of them were from Plath's journals. The other half were from philosophers and poets I barely knew or didn't know at all. I had "The greatest lie of all is the feeling of firmness beneath our feet. We are at our most honest when we are lost." from Kierkegaard. Where did I get this? I know I did not know who he was. I had not yet read Kierkegaard.

But I pasted Plath everywhere. Plath's journals spoke to my bones. She had more quotes on the wall by my bed than anyone. There were so many little lines from her around to remind me— of something. Of themselves. There was what I considered "writer advice": "Be stoic when necessary and write— you have seen a lot, felt deeply, and your problems are universal enough to be made meaningful— WRITE." (I cited it "Plath, to self.") By the head of my narrow bunk bed I posted something written two months before she tried to kill herself in 1953. That was the only one I cited with a date. Did I know what 1953 meant then? The summer she tried to kill her twenty year old body? I was just starting to research, to really read. "I want to love somebody because I want to be loved. In a rabbit fear I may hurl myself under the wheels of the car because the lights terrify me, and under the dark blind death of the wheels I will be safe. Plath May 14, 1953."

PLATH OFTEN USES second person in her journal as if the real life events she depicts were happening to someone else. Perhaps she is just practicing the different tense to become comfortable with it as a writ-

ing technique. But at times, it sounds like she has two selves; one is telling the story of herself to her other self. Example: when she is a freshman in college, she tells the story of a blind date; the entire passage is in second person. "You meet Bill in the car" (40). The narrator (both Plath and not Plath) tells how Bill takes you to a fraternity house; there are other couples; most of them look steady; at first the conversation was bad, shallow, so you propose that you will let him know you if he will do the same. "You'll say: I know a little about a person that no one else knows very well" (41). You mean yourself. You dance, and then he asks you to walk. He says "I want to talk. We can't talk here." You agree. "He has led you up behind the fraternity house to a clearing in the pines overlooking the city. The perfect place to discuss god & life. You sit down, leaning against a pine tree trunk."

He tells you his father died two weeks ago. You say "Tell me" you think "This is life; material; for sympathy." He begins to talk, and you let him put his head on your shoulder. "There there baby." He keeps talking and you ask him about the war and about the women he's had. He tells you he wants you to be his, "all his" (42). "When?" "Now." He picks up your leg. He takes your body and moves it for you. He does not ask. He tells you. "No." "He fights you." "Lay, Sylvie. Lay." He uses your name. He has your name. But it's not your name, it's the childhood nickname; what Mother would call you.

You almost don't remember his name. It's printed on the formal documents you must have buried so far in your desk you don't know where they are anymore. Or you threw them away. You have to think and think about what his name is. You don't remember his name as belonging to him. You remember someone else having the name after him and shivering and

Luke Lemmon
"Dog Days Are Over 2"
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate



wanting to leave and feeling silly about it. Ken. Like Barbie. Kenneth? You don't know. He told the police that you knew each other, you were close because he knew your middle name. Drunk on the couch for the five minutes you were alone outside of your bedroom you told him your middle name. Fun fact about yourself Your legal name is Hannah Camille Tullis but you only get called Millie. HannahCamilleTullis. He said he told you his middle name. You don't remember that either. After a week you forgot his first name. "They knew each other, friends, even if they had met less than an hour before." You had the poster of Plath from the State Research Symposium in the living room. He asked about it. You don't know what you said. He cited that as something else he knew about you, your in-

terests. You were strangers. But you don't remember moving to the bedroom either. You don't even know if you remember what you remember is right so stop talking about it

In the journal entry, Plath's narrator tells Bill "no" clearly but she doesn't seem angry at him for pushing himself on top of her. Except for a minute. Then "you trail off. You sound ridiculous." He wanders off. You tell him to come back. "Bill!" You call softly, "come back." He wanders off. You start to walk back. You find him. You apologize. "At last he forgives you. (What for? You should be forgiving him.)" (43). He lays his head in your lap and he tells you to kiss him. You do. "He takes your hand, pulls it along." He takes your body and moves it for you. Does things to

it. But it isn't you. It can't be. Just body. "You touch soft, writhing flesh. You scream in a quick indrawn breath. So this is what it's like to have a boy want you to masturbate him... It's only... but you say "No no no no no no no." You are eighteen.

You are nineteen. You broke up with Adam the week before. It's the night before Valentine's day, it's three in the morning, it's Valentine's Day, and you aren't alone. You didn't tell him he could take off your dress or panties but you didn't tell him not to. You didn't tell him to lick in you but it's just kissing just kissing you told Marie no below the belt before she left you alone to go to her boyfriend's house but he just started doing it and at least you weren't alone. He asks you if you want to have sex. You say no. He asks you why. You say you don't know him. He laughs and says he knows your middle name and wordlessly danced with you at the party, grabbed your hips through the dress before meeting you. You are old friends by now. You laugh. Laughing is the same as yes. He had asked you two or three times before. He slips it in while you are laughing. You are not you when you wake up. Adam tries to get back together the next week. But then he tells you it didn't count if you don't try to fight him off. Saying no wasn't enough. Did he laugh when he said it? He says, "You just had drunk, unprotected sex with someone you didn't want to have sex with. Sounds like a pretty normal college experience to me." You almost get back together with Adam.

Note that this passage is also of interest because it is the only place in Plath's journal where she revises. The editor's note reads
SP originally ended entry 45 with the following sentences: 'But you will see him if he asks again. You are a girl.' SP erased these sentences and wrote: 'And you won't see him if he asks again.' Earlier in the paragraph

SP originally wrote: 'You know that you will go out with him again if he asks.' She later changed 'will' to 'won't.' SP continued to see Bill after her first date. (678)

Tullis, Millie. *Journal fragment, unpublished, no date.*

AT SOME POINT the abstractions stop. I can understand that there is no "I" that I had believed in before. I can see identity as a shedding and budding and growing that we try to name and keep like a pet. But how can I see my body that way? My body is my house. My body is here-- my hands are my mother's and my own and I have always known them. Even if I can't always wrap my mouth around naming what happened to me, I know that something happened to my body.

Someone took something from my world. But it was the world. ●



Natsumi Then Shimazaki
“cinem ve lese 2”
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate

GRADUATE FICTION

Breach

Kathryn Christian
First Place Fiction
Graduate

Alison leaves the farmhouse before the sun breaks over the craggy peaks of the Bitterroot Range. Today is the day she will visit her mother's grave. Her car stands frozen and metallic in the early dawn, the windows latticed with intricate patterns of heavy frost. In a few hours, the sun will thaw the tilled earth in the fields, a strong stench of pungent manure and rotting yellowed corn husks polluting the air.

Alison fiddles with her keys, the wool scarf falling from the bridge of her sharp nose as she looks back toward the house. Her husband, Jack, is still buried beneath the thick duvet, his snores pushing into the pillow. She had tiptoed out of the room, silencing the alarm before it blared out.

The Chevy's engine bellows to life, shattering the silence of the morning. She turns on the long, furled drive towards Highway 28.

When Jack wakes, he'll find the note in the kitchen, the blue ink scrawled on the back of a receipt beside an empty coffee mug.

Jack,

I'll be home later today. You know where I'll be.

-Ali

Jack will fish today. The salmon are running at their peak, charging up the Clark Fork River with great ferocity, pushing through the white water and into the slow eddies as the river spills onto the Eastern plains. Alison imagines the wide arc of Jack's line, slipping through the bruise-colored dawn, catching slivers of light. He'd find her note, pack the poles and handtied flies and waders in the Silverado, and think little of her absence.

He understands, to a certain degree at least, Alison thinks. Or perhaps he doesn't understand at all. The yearly resurgence of pain from her mother's death brought on by Alison's pilgrimage to her mother's grave does not make sense to him. It's clear in the way that his rough hands stroke her thick hair when she speaks to him of it. The way he asks her delicate questions—are you sure you need to do this? Is it necessary to feel sad again?

It doesn't matter how many times she tries to put the searing pain of her mother's absence into words for him. She can't spoon feed him answers. She knows what she wants—to press her forehead against the cool headstone. Despite her lack of faith in God or snippets of spirituality, she needs to feel her mother's presence crackling in the honeyed leaves. She desires the clarity of a whisper, her mother's voice carrying through the current of some distant northern wind.

Whether or not Jack comprehends this is beside the point.

The tires of the Chevy finally meet the smooth, black tongue of Highway 28. She points the car west. The sun is slow to rise, shining across the valley and

cutting its yellow rays on the twisted spinal cord of the Bitterroots. She turns on NPR, letting Diane Ream's silk voice push through her thoughts and distract her with events in some distant, urban place she's never been.

The coffee stains her breath. She wonders if Jack is awake, if he's stretched his fingers across the mattress, finding her place empty, still warm.

Her mother was confident in the water, especially on the day she died—she navigated the slick, mossy rocks, the bottoms of her feet melding perfectly to their sloped shapes. Her forest green one-piece looked nearly black after being submerged, a dark contrast to the bright flame of her red hair. Up close, Alison knew there were lines of gray that ran through her locks, like small tributaries. Further upstream, Jack swooped his line out over a lazy eddy, his casts careful and calculated.

"Ali!" Her mother twisted the water out of her hair, her knuckles turning white.

"How's the water?" Alison asked. Her toes furled in the warm sand.

"Wonderful. Want to join later?" She collapsed beside her, a million grains of sand sticking to her wet skin. "I want to go further out."

"I get scared."

"Dear god, are you even my child?" She beamed.

"Dad hated water. Maybe I got his genes."

"You loved it as a little girl. You'd sit so close to the edge on the bow of the boat that I always had to keep a hand on your life jacket."

"Guess I've wizened up in my old age."

"Old age," her mother scoffed. "You're twenty-five, barely a quarter of a way through your life." Her body softened in the sand. Small drops of water rolled off her thighs. At forty-eight, her mother was still beautiful, lithe. So much so that Alison grew jealous at times—she had inherited a bit of her father's propensity towards flab.

The river caught the reflection of the high noon sun. Jack crossed deeper into the current upstream. Her mother dozed beside her as Alison turned her face towards the light, hoping the firework pattern of freckles across her face wouldn't deepen too badly. A mountain blue jay flitted to the bank, tipping his blue throat back as he sipped the cool water. On a cragged granite ridge high above them, Alison followed a line of whitetails with her eyes, their brown bodies nearly invisible against the landscape. She wondered how many of them would be shot in the next few months, their antlers pointing in sharp spikes from the beds of pickup trucks.

Her mother stretched her limbs, waking from her sleep. Alison turned to her.

"Good nap?"

"Yeah. I'm going back in. Get Jack down here at some point. I want lunch soon."

"Pulling him out of a good hole is like yanking teeth," Alison said as she looked for him.

He'd disappeared—perhaps gone further up-river.

"Well get him down here soon! You're the boss, my girl!" she called as she waded into the river.

"Barely," Alison murmured under her breath. Her mother extended her limbs, her wide strokes carrying her out. Alison marveled at how her body



barely broke the surface tension. She watched her for a moment, then picked up a Grisham novel, turning back to some grisly murder scene where she had left off.

She didn't know how much time passed, but the sun shone with an aggressive force, the rays pricking her skin with sharp heat. Alison snapped her mind out of the book's predictable plot. Her eyes stung from the oppressive light. She glanced out to the river, looked for the bright flame of her mother's hair. She was nowhere.

The sand where her mother had lain still held the shape of her body. She couldn't have been gone that long—fifteen minutes maybe? Not that long. She had been here just a moment before—maybe not a moment, but surely not more than twenty minutes?

Alison lifted her body from the sand, feeling heavy from the heat and the sedentary position she'd held. She stumbled to the edge of the bank, the water lapping in little waves at her feet. She dipped her toes and pulled back. It was cold—much colder than she'd expected. A finger of fear pressed into her throat.

She glanced upstream. The wind whistled empty through the bunchgrass and the driftwood snags on the edge of the banks. Jack was nowhere.

“Mom!” she called out, a strange bubble in her voice. Her heart beat in uneven patterns, jagged. The rush of water and wind intertwined their notes. She walked further downstream. She couldn’t have gone that far, Alison thought. Stupid Mom, she always went too far, didn’t she? She said she would, right? The panic picked up her pace, her legs like plastic as she crossed the rocks on the edge of the beach.

“Mom!” The river stretched, then puckered in the near distance, spitting rapids, the snarls of branches and deadfall caught on spiked boulders. And that’s when she knew. That was the dead end. Her mother couldn’t have gone that far. Her mother, a native Montanan, would not have swum so close to the rocks, because she knew the river’s current and crooks like a map etched in her mind.

The water was so cold—too cold for July, colder than expected.

“Mom!” Alison screamed. A thousand shards of light pricked her skin, an invasion— some strong mixture of fear and terror and shock, the knowing flooding every fiber of her body.

Jack tore down the bank, stumbling from his water-logged waders. Alison watched him through blurred vision, screaming. She couldn’t form the word Mom—the screams were long, shattering out of her mouth. She clawed at her clothes, tearing them off her body as she stumbled over the slick rocks of the riverbed, pushing herself deeper into the water.

“Stop Ali! Stop!” Jack rushed past her, nearly naked, his baby blue boxers diving beneath the

surface. His clothes littered the beach, haphazardly strewn in the sand.

He dove. He resurfaced again. He swam further, his strokes frantic. Alison swam after him, clawing at the water, the cold liquid numbing her body. Jack crept further towards the rocks and the rapids downstream. Alison couldn’t keep up. The water was heavy, jostling her body with its strong force.

Two bodies—Alison’s and Jack’s—treaded water, their lungs screaming from the frenzied strokes, the ferocity of their beating limbs a sharp ache. The wind sent a breath of cool air over their wet faces. Ali’s sobs carried over the water.

“Mom!”

By the time she pulled herself to shore, by the time the red-and-white boats arrived, the men in uniform combing the water, she noticed that the outline of her mother’s form in the sand was gone, brushed away by the hand of the wind.

Each year, when the explosion of crimson and gold colors the highlands, the Clark Fork River grows thick with salmon. Beneath the shadows of the pregnant waters, their fat bodies battle the current for the spawning beds. In turn, the diesels and men in trucker caps encroach upon the river, their silver boats dotting the surface of the current.

Alison thinks of the cyclical nature of the salmon’s lives, their tragic deaths lining the shores, polluting the air with the stink of their rotting flesh. What inner, prehistoric instinct drives them to journey through the veins of inner America to lay their eggs? As Alison rounds another curve in the highway, she thinks of their tails pulsing forward in the Clark

Fork that runs beside the road. She's 48 miles from Missoula. The salmon are far from their destination in the headwaters where they'll lay their eggs, only snapping to the surface to snatch a twirling crane fly, a fallen beetle.

Five months ago, Alison felt the push of bile in her throat, the swell of her breasts against the cups of her bra. She knew what it meant. She waited, to no avail, for the blood to push from her, waited for the thick scent of rust to fill her nose. She had bought the test, peed on the stick, and watched as the red lines crossed formidably. As she rounds another bend in the road, a small push of fear fills her core. She carries this child inside her, a small yet monumental secret that she's hidden from Jack. The life of a woman's body is intensely private—she can choose to speak of the morning sickness, the swell of her breasts, the dull pain in her lower back, but she doesn't. She swathes her secret with heavy wool sweaters and sports bras, carries herself in a posture that is upright and normal, despite the ache. If Jack notices, she blames it on the chill of fall air, the pressure of hard ranch work. But she can't keep the secret for long. Soon her stomach will spill over her waistband and the hours in bed will extend well past six in the morning.

Now, as she drives toward Missoula to her mother's grave, making the serpentine turns through the canyon, she wonders how much longer she can wait until she tells Jack. The small curve of her stomach is more prominent, the fabric of her jeans pulling tight at her sides.

The shock of pregnancy, Alison thinks, is like the hopelessness of drowning. You let the cool water kiss your legs, let the sand filter between your toes. You wade further, deeper, the arches of your feet

melding perfectly with the slick rocks. But you slip—the moss tricks you, a log snags at your skin. You're down, plummeting into darkness. The eddy is deeper, the current stronger than you thought. Your body fills with water, no matter how tightly you keep your mouth shut. The foreign substance, once seemingly docile, overtakes every orifice, leaks liquid poison—an invader. Your lungs scream, beg for air. You wish to break the surface, but the weight of your body keeps you down. The water pushes you into the stones, entangles you. Until you aren't really a woman or a human at all—you're part of the river, a new organism. A new being.

"Have you and Jack talked about kids?" her mother had asked once. They had been sitting in the kitchen of her mother's home. Bing Crosby's crooning voice poured through the speakers of the radio on the shelf. The snow fell in heavy, wet flakes outside, sliding down the windows in odd, slippery patterns. It was almost Christmas, the winter before her mother's death.

"We've only been married eight months, Mom."

"It's not a topic of conversation?" Her mother's brow furrowed as she slathered white icing over a reindeer-shaped sugar cookie.

"The ranch is busy. I told you we got three new goats last week?"

"I'm talking about human kids, not goat kids, sweetie." Her mother chuckled at her own joke. Alison rolled her eyes.

"Once everything has calmed down, we'll consider it."

Her mother set the frosted reindeer cookie on the

plate in front of her. She wrapped her arms around her daughter's neck.

"I just think you're going to be a wonderful mother," she whispered in Alison's ear.

Alison flies by a mileage sign. Half an hour to Missoula. She turns up the car radio's volume, white-knuckling the steering wheel with one hand. Her mother's presence is everywhere—memories seep from the cobwebs of her mind, boxes cracking open and snippets of conversation with her mother are relived. Even the waters of the Clark Fork River seem to hold her image—the reflection of the cobalt sky and the spit of rapids reminds her of her mother's body gliding through the water, her fiery hair tailing behind her as she swam.

There are patterns that cannot be erased—through the long, native Montanan bloodlines of her family, the women all die young. Too soon, cancer spreads across their ovaries, knots within their breasts. She had never met her grandmother, a true ranch woman, who ran cattle on horseback while her bald head was wrapped in a bandana after countless rounds of chemo. Her mother had told her the stories—the women in her family worked hard, married young, produced ranch kids, and then died before they met their grandbabies, died before they could let their bodies rest and reap the benefits of their difficult lives. They were survived by husbands who had to tell their children and grandchildren stories of their mothers and grandmothers, who seemed more like idyllic ghosts than the sinewy flesh and bones that carried them sturdily through their short lives.

I don't believe in curses, Alison thinks. But if they're real, then the women in my family are be-

witched on the day they breach their mothers' wombs.

Alison knows that Jack will adore the baby. She can almost hear the hammer as nail meets pine, the echo of blows reverberating around the walls of their garage. The crib will be built quickly, and the rocking chair, and the dresser. The women will come, bearing silver-and-gold wrapped gifts, burnishing pastel colored clothing or the forest green boxes of Pampers.

They'll sip weak mimosas, place their hands on her belly, marvel at the thickness of her prenatal hair, run through it with their manicured nails. The men will twirl Jameson in tumblers, heartily slap Jack on the back, telling him that life is over as he knows it. "Good luck with the nights," they'll say, or, "Say adios to your sex life." And Jack will beam, gazing at the glow of Alison's flushed cheeks, the protrusion of her rounded belly.

The child will burst from her in the spring, squealing and emancipated. The child will love Alison at first—dive for the warmth of her bosom, the sweetness of her milk. But what if all the nurturing, all the care, isn't enough? The child will not know their grandmother—the stories of her attraction to water and the elements will slip seamless from Alison's lips, but they will never swim with her, twirl her red hair with their small fingers.

The nightmare that plagues her spins a web of darkness in her mind: that Alison herself will die too soon, following the women of her blood to the grave. Her child will have to live with the pain, that same seed of fear and longing for something that was never quite there, just out of the reach of their memory.

The traffic begins to increase along the highway,

signaling the nearness of Missoula.

Jeeps and Priuses sail past her Chevy, which can't rumble above a mere seventy miles per hour.

The Clark Fork River grows placid, a slow, soft accompaniment beside the smooth black road. The river ebbs and weaves through the boulders like a fat, satiated rattlesnake. The water turns reflective, no longer pocked with whitewater as it completes its journey through the incisors of sharp boulders.

Her mother loved this time of year. The crunch of the leaves underfoot, the sharp pungency of morning dew that brings the smell of earth to life. Alison remembers the way that she retired her bathing suits for crusty hiking boots, hiking into the hills with her dogs.

"Have you ever seen such beauty?" her mother had asked her once as they crested Founder's Hill, her two border collies breaking trail ahead. The hills etched themselves in color like an intricate patchwork quilt.

"We see it every year, don't we?" Alison said, brushing the sweat from her eyes.

"But not like this. Not with this much color," her mother said, gesturing towards a brilliant yellow aspen.

"You're always taken aback by anything beautiful."

"You could say that I'm easily inspired."

"Or easily entertained," Alison retorted playfully.

She took Alison's hand then. The dogs nipped at each other's tails. A V-shape of Canadian geese sailed overhead, their calls echoing sharply against

the granite cliffs. Her mother lifted her nose to the air, inhaling.

"Or," she said, "just plain grateful."

Alison parks the Chevy and walks through the lines of thick, manicured evergreens. She finds her mother's headstone, and lets herself crumple to her knees, her hands pressing to the cool granite etched with her mother's name. Lydia Alison Thompson. She traces her fingertips over the letters, as if slowly spelling them out. The gray headstone sits with the generations of women who share Alison's blood. Baby girls that bloomed indigo from her grandmother's and great-grandmother's wombs, still amphibious, unformed. They drowned in air, released from the liquid pouch before their lungs developed. The women and girls all lay to rest beneath the pines, the stones the only markers of their presence.

The Clark Fork River brushes past the hills beneath the cemetery. In a few weeks, the salmon fry will hatch, nourished by the nutrients that flow in the water. They'll grow—so small at first, tiny amphibious forms, unsure of their vast world. Their bodies will catch in the current, navigating the same waters where their parents' bodies drifted belly-up to the shores. They'll be alone, yet somehow, many will survive. Instinct will tell them to swim downriver, to let their bodies be carried towards some place that they have never known. They'll find shelter in the small crevasses beneath rocks, in the deadfall snags. Their bodies will grow stronger, their fins and mouths taking shape, their internal systems morphing from freshwater environment to saline.

Somehow, despite the incredible odds, despite the lack of guidance or nurturing, they'll find their way

to the Pacific, and not long after that, instinct will tell them to swim back to the headwaters of their birthplace, to repeat the cycle. To die for the possibility of life, for the resurgence of their population.

A cool wind kisses the back of Alison's neck, sending a shiver through her body. In that moment, a small movement swirls in her belly. Instinctually, she lays her hand over her sweater, cupping her stomach. A leaf breaks its grasp from an aspen, dancing elegantly in the current of the wind before settling several yards away. She smiles.

"Hi, little one," she whispers. "Let me tell you about your grandmother."

Somewhere beneath the river's surface, a salmon flicks her tail and propels herself forward. ●

Ghost Light

Anastasia Lugo Mendez

Second Place Fiction

Graduate

Ghost light shone on the empty beach. The waves came to the shore with the sound of an airplane traveling at 30,000 feet. It was Beth's first time seeing the ocean. It was her first time hearing it.

When she tried to go to sleep with their window open to let in the salt air—the way Steven preferred it—she thought she was back in her first Chicago apartment, traffic rushing by as the gray sky rained on the gray street below. It was hard to believe that same sound could come from something so blue. Watching the scene from the living room's floor to ceiling windows she realized that, at least in this light, everything out there was grey, or black, or bone white.

She stayed there for a long time, staring at the white foam as the swells stood up into waves and the waves broke on the beach. She had walked to the shore earlier that day. She had thought Steven would join her, but the first thing he had done when they arrived was investigate the wireless router. He had talked about returning to his hometown on the Pacific for months now, but instead busied himself with an Ethernet cable, which he said was old-fashioned and tacky. He stayed connected to it like an umbilical cord, a current of life. Beth had wet her feet alone, the chilling cold of the Pacific shooting into her bones.

The next morning, Steven woke her with a kiss, an apology for something yet to happen. They ate breakfast in silence, the light rising like blinds opening on the world. He said he would be busy with work, but would be done soon. He left her to walk the beach alone.

The pale sand underfoot was littered with broken crab legs. Beth wanted to match them together like puzzle pieces—here a left, and a right, and a left, and a right. But there were no bodies. An image flashed through her mind: a pelican with crab legs poking out of its beak. With a crack the dangling coral-pink legs fell, disappearing into the water as the pelican rose into flight. She saw no pelicans.

Farther down the beach, away from the vacation rentals that she and Steven had so carefully researched, she began to see more cars parked near the highway, their owners scattered on the water or the beach, some surfing, some walking. Up near the impromptu parking lot, another handful of people sat on car hoods or folding chairs. They drank beers and raised their binoculars to watch as surfers caught the few peeling waves they could find. She found a large, twisted piece of driftwood away from the water. She watched as surfers paddled and paddled and paddled, or as they sat, waiting for signs of a good wave. When one of them called it quits and stopped to talk to her after getting out of the water she was polite, reserved. He dripped at her feet, an open question, but she wanted to give no answers and excused herself to continue on her walk.

She turned back and saw the man striding up the beach with his board. It was a missed opportunity. He had the kind of eyes she'd always been attracted to when she was younger—a shade of green that was almost translucent. She watched him make his way



Luke Lemmon
“Dog Days are Over 3”
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate

to his car and was tempted to walk back to him, but then what? Steven was at home, waiting.

THEY HAD MET four years ago, at a fundraising event for the University of Chicago Law School. She had been one of the organizers. He had complained to her about the catering, matter-of-fact, devoid of emotion.

Not enough options. Not enough food. Poor wine. He had walked away without saying good-bye.

Beth had hated him. At the time she had hated all lawyers, caught in a convoluted divorce from a limp-haired cellist. They had nothing, and he wanted most of it.

When her first lawyer told her to yield to the

cellist, she fired him and started looking for a new one in the list of alumni donors to the Law School. Steven had given one of the largest donations. She called him and scheduled an appointment.

This time he was more amicable. He saved her money in the divorce. His name alone frightened the cellist's lawyer into backing down. He waived his fees in exchange for a date.

It wasn't an honorable thing to do, but she could dishonor herself to save the money. She had never expected one date to turn into several, or several dates to turn into "dating," this "dating" ultimately turning into a long-term relationship now nearing year three. Over time, his callousness and bartering revealed something different. An awkwardness beneath the skin, a fear of letting a good opportunity go. Not romantic, but steadfast.

And steadfastness had led to this vacation, to celebrating their anniversary. Three years next Saturday. A blissful week on the coast.

Her walk ended where the beach curved and disappeared, at a bluff reaching into the sky. The trees on the cliffs all bent the same direction, bare branches exposed. A driftwood graveyard had amassed hundreds of gnarled white logs and branches at the base of the bluff. A trail of broken crab legs wobbled through the sand. The boulders at the edge of the water were covered in anemones, mussel shells, and citrus-colored starfish. By then there was no one else; she'd left the surfers and the romantic couples behind. Even the fishing boats she had gotten used to spotting had disappeared.

She thought about sleeping there. When she had been in college in Michigan she and a group of friends had camped out on the lake one night. They brought sleeping bags and pads, hot dogs and a bottle

of lighter fluid, a cooler full of beer. They spent the afternoon collecting driftwood, went skinny dipping after building up a sweat, and then, when they were hungry and cold, started a bonfire. They bunched their sleeping bags together to keep warm. Every few hours she woke to see the flames still raging, heat kissing her face. She could see it happening on this beach. She suddenly craved beer and food and youth. It was all so far from her now.

On her way back she hurried, afraid that Steven would be missing her and worrying that she hadn't returned. It had been hours and the sunny sky was clouding over. The fog bank seemed to crawl closer, obscuring her footsteps. Her worry started to ease when she got back to the vacation homes; she walked through the beach grass with a lighter heart. She was almost glad to see Steven after such an afternoon—maybe what they had needed was time apart. Time for her to relax, for him to relax.

Inside the house she found a pizza box along with a note written on long yellow paper.

Beth – Leftovers if you want any. Got tired. Sleeping.

SHE READ FOR THE rest of the evening. She reheated the pizza and pulled off the pepperoni slices, channel-surfed but found nothing to watch. She tried to read again. She sat out on the deck and watched the pulsing of the ocean, the faint traces of a sunset behind a thick wall of clouds. When she finally got tired, she joined Steven in bed. He was sprawled across it. She pushed him onto his side and got under the covers. He stirred and moved closer, wrapping his arms and legs around her. She wanted to feel the gesture carried some affection, but it was more primal than that. He clung to her with the instinct of a newborn animal.

She counted in her head until she fell asleep.

When she woke around four A.M., she knew he was awake. The blue light of his laptop shone from the living room. She heard the clatter of his hands on the keyboard, like a long downpour of marbles onto the keys.

She got up and opened the window. The sound of the ocean filled the room. She went back to sleep.

IT HAD BEEN so easy to settle for him and believe that she wasn't. He had an apartment on Lake Shore Drive with big windows and wood floors. He took her out to the best restaurants in Chicago. They went to the theater. They took vacations in the Florida Keys, Maine, the Grand Canyon, Ireland. She didn't have to spend a dime, and he never once reminded her of the cellist. He came to all her fundraising events. He knew how to smooth talk people into giving, and he would give himself. He looked good next to her, tall but not distracting—proportional. He had straight white teeth and a good haircut. He wore nice shoes. Their first Christmas together he bought her a white gold necklace with a diamond pendant. It was easy to see their life together.

She somehow forgot that they hardly liked any of the same things. He snored very heavily at night. He took his Krav Maga classes too seriously and his aggression worried her. He liked books by Dan Brown and movies about Jack Ryan. He liked cats. He had a lot of back hair. He had a way of telling her what was wrong with her body perfunctorily: You're getting wrinkles. You need another haircut. Those shoes look like they belong on a nurse. He looked down on people who didn't have a lot of money. He thought it was "cute" when she decided to become a vegetarian and, despite repeatedly saying that her

hips weren't getting any smaller, got annoyed when she left the house early in the morning to run.

First one year, then another, and now three. In between the paper cuts of their daily life, they had stayed together. She lived in the expensive apartment with him. She had grown affectionate of his tortoiseshell cat, a shelter rescue that wasn't expensive, a purebred, and didn't match the furniture, and yet he loved it. And when he looked at Beth, sometimes she felt he looked at her the same way. She did not fit in his life, and yet he loved her. He kept her.

The next morning she went for another walk, leaving him immersed in case files. He took the time to say good morning and ask her for a fresh cup of coffee. When this was done, she stood next to him, waiting to get a thank you, or some of his attention. He wrapped a hand around her wrist, his grip loose and his skin soft. He promised he would be done soon.

Outside, she saw the surfers again. She didn't think it would be the same crowd but the man with the light-colored eyes waved at her when he walked past. He waded into the ocean, paddled out and ducked under waves. She held her breath until he popped up again on the other side. She told herself to leave before he got out of the water. Otherwise they might have a real conversation.

The prospect felt like cheating—maybe because she couldn't have a real conversation with Steve. She watched her surfer catch a long ride and tumble off his board at the end of it. He got back up and started paddling out again. She turned and walked back to the house.

THAT EVENING SHE sat on the deck and watched as the waves crashed out on the breakers, sending clouds of mist into the air. She had brought out her binoculars,

hoping to see whales, but the ocean was restless. The waves rolled in and the cloud cover that she had taken as characteristic for the coast got thicker and darker as the wind picked up.

Steven was still working on his case. When she'd returned to the house she had found the refrigerator's contents on the kitchen table, a half-eaten sandwich abandoned on a paper plate. He had been asleep on the forest green sofa, CNBC droning in the background and his laptop whirring on his chest. She turned the television off. When she went to move the laptop he stirred and looked at her, confused and almost hurt.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She barely felt like explaining, trying silence and a half-hearted gesture. He realized where he was and nodded, then sat up, wiped his eyes and went back to typing. When Beth went to clean up the food on the table he asked for the rest of his sandwich.

"You should make yourself some food," he said. She nodded and kept putting things away. She couldn't bring herself to speak. She didn't know what was worth saying. So she sat outside and watched as the weather got worse and the noise got louder.

She walked into the house to try and talk to him, to see if he wanted dinner. He was asleep again, this time with a hard-cover tome on his chest. Was the entire week going to be him eating, working, and sleeping? She found the keys to their rental car and left.

In the rearview mirror the house disappeared into the storm. She felt a sharp, uncomfortable pleasure at the thought of leaving him alone in the darkness.

A few dates into their courtship, Steven had invited her up to his apartment. She was certain it was a bad idea, but she'd never been in a building as expensive as his. She followed him upstairs and he

made her a drink—a white Russian, thick and cloying on the tongue. She sipped it and stared at the lake and the traffic below, a river of red, white and yellow lights that streamed like the city's lifeblood. She was fascinated and enamored. When he kissed her she went with it. When he led her to his couch she let him, just to keep that feeling. And when the lights went out in the apartment, in the whole building, in that whole section of Chicago, she heard his breath catch. He held on to her for dear life, his chest spasming with quick, shallow panic. He trembled in her arms. She hadn't known what to do. She had stroked his hair and tried to soothe him. She turned on the backlight on her cellphone to light up a few feet of space around him, but the light only seemed to panic him more, the darkness around them intensifying.

Finally she had led him to the windows, fighting him for every step. When she got him there she made him stare at the traffic—all those lights still there, a vivid river. He watched the lights until he fell asleep in her arms, and she fell asleep next to him.

The next morning she had woken on the cold floor of his living room, a thin blanket draped over her body. He had gone out and come back with coffee and pastries. They didn't talk about it, they never talked about it, even though the blackout was the subject of every newspaper and watercooler conversation in town for the next two weeks.

"Where were you?" Everyone asked. Steven would laugh and say, "Would you believe I slept through the whole thing?"

For some time, she had felt like a hero. She had known what to do when he was afraid. He had needed her. She would look at Steven before falling asleep, the lights dark, and wonder why this was different. And what he would have done if she hadn't been there. If

he had needed her, or simply anyone.

THE PLACE SHE found for dinner was a slightly upscale restaurant specializing in pasta and cocktails. She had some of both, sitting at the bar and watching couples at least thirty years older than her playing the lottery and grinning as a mediocre band played live music. But the drink and food were good, and when her surfer man walked in she was not surprised to see him. He looked casually attractive, wearing blue jeans and a white button-down shirt.

She looked at the empty seat next to her and willed him into it. She wished that she had actually gotten a new haircut, that she had decided to wear a dress or a skirt instead of pants and a blouse. Old women wore pants and blouses. She wasn't far past thirty.

A young woman walked in behind the surfer and sidled up to him. She had long hair, tan skin, a taut athletic body unhindered by a sundress. They were led to a table at the back of the room, where she watched them order cocktails and appetizers. They talked constantly. They shared each other's food. It was as though all the lights in the restaurant had gone out but for the soft candlelight surrounding them. Beth drank more and tipped the bartender heavily. He looked out at her from under long eyelashes and for a moment she felt attractive.

She played with the condensation drops on her glass, the rings of water she left on the bar-top. The couple fed each other dessert, paid the check, left hand in hand. The lotto players shuffled out, the live band packing up their instruments in the relative silence of their well-worn conversations. The bartender started wiping the counter down. She asked him for the check and settled up, leaving her money under the glass,

waiting to see the bills begin to stick to the counter.

She stumbled out of the restaurant to sit in the rental car as long as she could. The ocean drowned her in noise. Heavy raindrops pelted the car and ran in torrents down the glass windows. The full moon was nowhere to be seen, blocked out by dark clouds.

There was a knock on the car window that startled her. She turned and saw the bartender, rain streaming down his jacket. She lowered the window and looked up at him. The restaurant lay in total darkness.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I really don't think you should be driving." Raindrops were caught in his lashes. She wanted to drag him into the car and beg him to be kind to her. She wanted to cry. She wanted to crash the rental car.

"I think you're right," she said. She stepped into the rain.

THE BARTENDER DROVE her home in a beat up '98 Corolla. She paid him by dropping \$20 on the floor of the car, hoping he wouldn't notice, and keeping her hands to herself. He was barely in his twenties. She could have been his babysitter once. He waved goodbye and left without wasting words.

She tried to take the stairs into the house by twos but lost her balance. She leaned on the railing as the wind whipped through her clothing.

The house was blue dark, cast in a gradient of shadows. She thought he must be asleep again. No faint blue light from his laptop, no sound of the keyboard. For a second she couldn't hear anything except the water beating furiously against the roof, the windows, the sand. Then she heard it. Fast, shallow breaths, like a panicked child trying to make sure the monster in the darkness cannot hear him.

She followed the sound into the living room. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness she saw a figure crouched in the corner. Papers were strewn across the coffee table just as they had been earlier. The laptop sat on the table, propped open, the screen black, the whirring finally silent. Beth's heartbeat stopped for a second, leaving total silence, absolute fear.

"Steven?" she whispered.

He whimpered in reply.

BETH HURRIED TO the basement, tripping down the stairs, trying to find the circuit breakers. She lit up her phone to see in the darkness, but all she could see was a rusty washer-dryer combo. She ran her hands along the walls, hoping to find that metal box. She felt nothing. She tried the stairwell, she tried the garage. There was nothing, nothing but the sound of his ragged breathing still echoing in her mind. She ran back inside, trying to keep herself from her own hysterics.

"Steven? Steven?"

He was still curled in a corner of the room. She tried to get near him but his sobbing intensified.

A scream grew solid in her throat, thick like glue and flour. She started rummaging through the kitchen drawers, running her fingers over knives and napkins and spare towels, and then there it was. A small flat package of plastic and cardboard. She ripped it open and counted in the dim light. Eight birthday candles.

She had no lighter. She heard herself laughing, of all things. Candles and no lighter. But then she remembered the stove. She sparked a burner, and then lit every candle in that halo of flame. The candles were different colors, the wax mixed in with glitter and shining in the darkness. She set them up on the table, standing each in a puddle of melted wax. Then

she dragged him over. He resisted at first, but his fear of the darkness became worse than his fear of the light, and he ventured through the dark to sit at their imaginary hearth.

The scream in her throat softened, giving way to an ache just beneath her breastbone. They sat in the ghost light of the storm as it met the warm light from the candles. Shadows breathed across the walls, over their features. The storm grew louder, pouring into the spaces of their silence.

In the flickering light, Steven's eyes looked old, tired. He could hardly breathe, air flowing in and out of his lungs with the sound of sandpaper. His face was wet. He held her hand, his grip tight, his fingers cold. She moved closer to him, settling her shoulder against his, wrapping her other hand around his. She felt a headache building at her temples. She could leave him. She could go to the bedroom and sleep through the storm. But she would not. He loved her. Or he kept her. Whichever it was, she would sit with him until it was light, a statue carved, like a gargoyle, to defend him from the dark. ●

Desert Rats

Keoki Kemp

Third Place Fiction

Graduate

The gun didn't feel as heavy in his hand as he thought it would. Maybe because he'd worried about it so much. Kind of like dreading a shot in the arm, and when the needle finally goes in it doesn't hurt so bad. The gun weighed heavier in his head than in his hand. The metal of the gun began to warm as if greeting him, opening up to him. Had he searched so long for this comfort of power? *Dame todo el poder*. Give me all the power. Would the gun give him the power to seize control of his life? Could something so little give him all that? *No lo creo*. Though he didn't believe, he'd try anyway. A smooth, dark Glock, dark like him, dark like the tarantulas that scuttled across the desert floors of Southern California. *Negro pero bien negro*.

Nestor de Santos had a thin, sparse mustache dusted onto his upper lip. He looked like a brown grasshopper. All arms, legs, and big beady eyes—so anything he wore made him look like someone's wannabe kid brother.

Sometimes he just got fed up with how the world balanced itself out. He had a father who worked too much and cared too little, a mother who worried

more about her husband and her circle of friends than protecting her son, and a community who viewed Latinos as a malignant tumor on the body of society. If the community didn't remove the evil soon, the Latinos would corrupt and destroy everything. *Y no tengo control de nada*.

"Hey Nestor," said Ignacio. "You going to do it or are you a *cobarde*, eh?" The scar on Ignacio's right eyebrow danced as he raised it. Ignacio wore a brown bandana tied around his head above his eyebrows. The clothes he wore bagged around his body and made his torso look drawn out like an accordion.

Ignacio stood at the window to make sure no one interrupted. A new kid didn't try to go through initiation to the Desert Rats every day. The Desert Rats weren't the biggest or baddest gang in Apple Valley, but they treated their brothers like family and soon enough everyone would grow to fear and respect them. Nothing else mattered, *cierto*?

Nestor gripped the gun tighter and marched over to the chair in the middle of the room. The chair, a horrid sun bleached monster that they found out in the Mojave, sat in the center of the room over a scorched ring in the carpet. Crickets outside played a slow dirge.

Just off of Kiowa Road near Deep Creek, which flowed underground this late in the summer, they sequestered this man in an old boarded up building. A home with a faded yellow condemnation notice hanging on the door. Windows boarded up by 2x4's, clay shingles thrown loose by high winds and little care. The backyard didn't have a fence. Whoever owned the land didn't care about squatters, not that anybody could or would want to live off of a couple acres of desert land. Holes riddled the inside of the house.

No one ever went into these condemned houses. They picked the house because it stood right next to the railroad track, which went by the house at eleven o'clock without fail. If they timed the shot right, people wouldn't even hear it over the sound of the train. Years of tradition and brotherhood dictated, demanded, that initiation go down here in this decrepit house.

"Just do it *hombre*," Ignacio said. He crossed his arms and spit on the floor. *Un asqueroso es*. Though he had to admit that spitting on the ground wouldn't make it any more disgusting. Plus, the bloods and brains he'd soon add. *Sin duda* that'd make a mess on the floor, and the walls, and the ceiling, and his clothes as well. At least he thought so. He'd never witnessed an execution in real life, so he had no idea how it worked. Just in case, though, they had taped plastic sheets on the walls and lined the floors with a painter's tarp. *El Jefe* had said the less evidence they left behind the better.

Nestor checked the action of the handgun, then chambered a round. Tied to the chair wriggled a man in jeans with a pillowcase tied around his face. The pillowcase, an improvised execution hood, protected somebody, but Nestor didn't know who. As soon as the man heard him chamber a round he panicked even more. Nestor whipped the man in the face with the gun. That'd show Ignacio that a cowardly bone didn't exist in his body. Though he wondered who he was trying to prove this to—Ignacio or himself. If the man uttered a sound, he hadn't heard it. Ignacio gaged the man before dumping him off at the house.

"I ain't a *cobarde*, Ignacio. I'm going to do it. *Si Dios quiere*."

The older Latino rubbed the stubble on his head and then cracked his neck. He glowered at Nestor

who crouched over their prisoner. Nestor didn't need to hear a response to know what thoughts tumbled around inside Ignacio's brain. Death, brotherhood, women, money, family pride. Emotions and memories all bundled up into a volatile cocktail that poisoned the mind into euphoric bliss. Did satisfaction feel like that? Did power feel like that? Would he feel like that once he seized control over his life?

The hand on the gun paled as Nestor squeezed the handle tight. Didn't Ignacio know better than to antagonize a man with a gun? Nestor couldn't kill him though, because if he did they'd never let him join the Desert Rats. And he needed that. He needed to belong.

The gun felt heavier now as he raised it to the forehead beneath the pillowcase. He could see the man's breath. With every inhalation he sucked the flower dotted cotton into his nostrils a bit. The water vapor in the man's breath formed two perfect dots. A low moan choked out from behind the sock in the man's mouth.

"And besides," Nestor said, "you know as well as I do that we can't kill him till the train comes around." Nestor imagined the discomfort of breathing with an old rank sock gagging every breath.

Ignacio strolled over to Nestor. He pushed Nestor out of the way, but made no attempts to take the gun from him. Ignacio walked behind the chair and grabbed the man by the shoulders and leaned in next to his face.

"Don't think you ain't going to die homie. If the boy doesn't kill you, I will." After he said the last word, Ignacio took a knife from his pocket and locked the blade in place. Before Nestor could even ask him what the hell he planned to do, Ignacio stabbed the man in the thigh. This time the man screamed so loud

the gag failed to stifle him. Blood oozed out the wound in his thigh. Ignacio wiped the blade on the man's shirt. Nestor switched the gun to his other hand in order to dry his sweaty palms on his jeans.

The chair almost unbalanced as the man thrashed about. It threatened to come loose at the joints. Ignacio then kicked him in the chest, toppling him over. With nothing else to do Nestor just watched as Ignacio pummeled the man in the stomach until he stopped squirming. Nestor could do it. He would do it. *No problema*. He'd never killed a man before, but people did it all the time. He shot enough bad guys in videogames, and his *compañeros* wouldn't let him kill somebody who didn't deserve it.

"And that," Ignacio said, "is how you do it. *Cierto no?*" Then he spit on the man. Always spitting. Why'd this *tipo* spit so much?

"Why'd you do that?" Nestor asked. "We could just kill him. There ain't no need to torture him too, *sabes?*" As soon as he said it, he regretted it. Nestor knew his place, and had stepped over the line. Ignacio stood pretty high on the list of *esses* you didn't want to mess with. He shouldn't have second guessed him. He couldn't back down now. Worse than asking questions is acting like *una perra* with his tail between his legs.

Ignacio got in Nestor's face, stepping on his toes and glaring down at him. Nestor stood his ground, not giving an inch when the bigger man pushed him. "You got a problem, huh, *vato?* You got a problem with how I do things? You want to end up just like him? Why you being such a pussy?" With each question he shoved Nestor again and again.

With the last question Nestor snapped. "*Calmate cabrón*, I ain't no pussy. I ain't going to be pushed around by you or anybody else, *sáله?*" Nestor pushed

the bigger man so hard that he fell on his ass, and he just about lost his grip on the gun. When Ignacio landed, he did the last thing Nestor expected—he laughed.

"*Eso, mijo*. That is what I want. I want you to show me you have *huevos*. That you have what it takes to pull the trigger. I wanted to see that anger in your eyes, man."

In this distance Nestor could hear the clack, clack of a train chuffing along the track. His heart began to beat so hard he could hear it in his ears, feel it beating in his fingertips. Ignacio got up and brushed off his butt. He nodded to Nestor. Soon.

"Can we at least take off the bag? Let him see the world one last time?" Nestor wanted to see the man's face, make sense of his fate. Why this man? Why today? Why did Nestor have to kill him and not some other fresh meat? Somehow their fates had intertwined. *Tants preguntas y pocas respuestas*.

"No," Ignacio said.

Outside, the streetlights began to flicker as the train came closer. The train flew by with such force it rattled the windows of nearby houses and made dogs howl.

"*Y porque no?*"

"*El Jefe* said to leave it on. That's why."

The man began to squirm, the wood of the chair squeaked with every writhing twist. Worms writhed around less when they got put on a hook. For some reason, he now fixated on that thick cotton mask. The flower design looked like it belonged more on an old lady's lampshade. He could see his *abuelita* embroidering some old couch cushion with the same design and showing it to him saying, "Nestor, *mijo*, isn't it so pretty? Isn't it just cute?"

"I'm going to take it off," Nestor said.

Ignacio scratched his chin. "If you take it off,

you have to kill him. If you don't, you know I have to kill you. *No hay otra manera.*"

The boards in the window began to vibrate, beating a weird tempo that increased Nestor's heart rate and made his hands sweatier. He tucked the gun in his waistband near the small of his back and dried his hands on his thighs again. Watching the man, he could see his chest heaving hard. Ignacio just watched. *Sangre*, he wanted blood. When he told *El Jefe* he wanted to join, Ignacio had volunteered to watch him, and Nestor imagined it was for no other reason than he loved to see blood, to spill it. Nestor gripped the chair pulling the man back up so he sat upright.

Fingers itchy, he reached out for the pillowcase. He untied the bindings that held the sack to the man's face. He could hear the train whistle. Why it cried so late into the night, he didn't know. Maybe the conductor didn't care about families, or about people. He might care just about his job, getting it done to please his boss. Just like every other conductor. He rubbed his thumb against his other fingers, eyes twitching, sweat beading on his nose. He seized the pillow case and yanked.

Nestor didn't know the man. He didn't know what he expected to see. A face of a friend, a relative, the person that bagged up his groceries at the *supermercado*? But the man beneath the bag held no special significance. A round face, skin tanned from working in the sun. Two thick eyebrows like a child drew them in permanent marker and a nose that resembled a cactus fruit, purple, veiny, and bulbous.

And what if, when he tore off the bag, he found his *mamá*? He liked to imagine that somehow he'd find the strength to say no, to turn the gun on Ignacio and unload the clip into his chest and watch as blood

stained his white tank-top. Ignacio's eyes, the color of whisky, studied his every movement.

Even if he killed Ignacio, which would mean killing someone regardless, you never escaped from the Desert Rats. Not if you killed one of their own. The gun dug into his back. The popcorn stucco that decorated the ceiling rained down as the cargo train hauled its freight closer.

"Just shoot him now, *buey*," Ignacio said.

Just shoot him. *Disparelo*. Simple. An easy thing to say, but to do? What could this man have done to deserve death? Nestor imagined the man's family. Perhaps he owned a business and his wife and three gorgeous daughters depended on him—not just for food but also protection. Feelings throbbed in his head and they hurt like the sting of fire ants. If someone killed *Papá* he would kill them. No, if, ands, or buts – or so he'd like to think. The prisoner's eye flicked and danced. Rimmed with red veins like cracks in the muddy surface of a dry lake bed. Nestor suspected that the man would soon piss himself.

Or perhaps the man drank too much. Beat his wife as frequent as he beat his dog. Treated her like a bitch, his daughters mini-bitches. Nothing more than *perras* to feed and care for. The man did have a nose like an alcoholic. Nestor could help the man's family by scrambling his brains. He could kill the guy so that God could judge him. As God judged them all, and found them all lacking. Nestor dreaded the day he'd come face to face with *El Señor*, and knew he'd dread it even more if he went through with this.

The metal of the gun felt cold when he took it from his waistband. No longer inviting. No longer a token of God passed down to man to instill upon him some great power. The man's pleading eyes filled with tears. The wrinkles on his forehead squished

his face together. He cried for *misericordia*. Mercy and justice, Nestor now held them both in his hands. Now that he had control, control of someone else's life, he no longer wanted it.

"Nestor you got to do it soon," Ignacio said., "The train is going to just pass us by. *El Jefe* needs this man dead."

"*Quién es el hombre?*"

"*Qué?*"

"This man," Nestor said. "Who is he?"

Ignacio made his way over to Nestor. Nestor jabbed the gun in Ignacio's direction. The bigger man raised his hands above his head in a placating gesture.

"You know the boss wouldn't ask you to kill him if he hadn't done something to us first."

"I know."

"And if you kill this man, we will be your family."

"*Lo sé.*"

Another step closer. "You don't need to know his name. *El Jefe* asked us to kill him, and that's all that matters. We're his *soldados*. We don't ask questions. We obey orders. *Nada mas.*"

The dryness in his throat made him want a glass of cold water. Nestor wanted nothing more than to swim in a cool pool and submerge his head to forget about his problems. Just float on the water and be a part of nothing for a while. The blare of the horn made it sound like the train parked itself outside the front door. *Ahora*. Now.

Nestor put the gun against the front of the man's head, his flesh puckering up as the cold steel met his skin. Nestor could feel the man's skull through the gun, a fragile eggshell so easy to crack. Ignacio, a looming giant, promised death. This man or me.

Why'd he do this? Nestor knew why. He had

always known why. *El Jefe* lived next door to him. Had treated him like a son as Nestor grew up. Had acted like a father to him unlike his own *Papá*. Had taught him the meaning of the word *familia*. Fed him. Played with him. Brought kids over so he could make friends. Little did he know that these kids would later become member of the Desert Rats. *El Jefe* gave each of them a choice, though he never forced any of them to join. He decided in the end to join because it felt natural. They chose to join, and in choosing there lies the power of control. Control of life's direction. Though maybe *El Jefe* just bought them with his platitudes and kindness. An alluring reek to attract young boys to their death like the devil's claw plant latched on to a host till they died. Once dead, he used their bodies to fertilize the seeds of a bigger empire.

The trigger gave so much. Each millimeter harder to squeeze than the last. The man's eyes accused him, screamed betrayal. Nestor heard about how people's lives flashed before their eyes right before they died. What did this man see? Did he feel sorrow or terror?

He yanked the trigger. He couldn't take it anymore. He pulled it again and again and again. With the first shot the man's head snapped back. Each additional shot came with such force that it tore additional chunks off of the man's face. Each bullet lashed out of the barrel of the gun with such force that it threatened to topple the man backwards. Each pull of the trigger a painful release. Till the hammer clicked dry and all the bullets spent. The steady clack of the traveling train trundled away, carried along with no recourse. It followed the path that others constructed for it. Could he have done nothing else? Did he choose this?

The gun started to slide out of his sweaty hand. He threw it at the wall in front of him and shut up



Luke Lemmon
“Dog Days are Over 5”
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate

his eyes, but it didn't stop. The *sangre*. The body of the man, the top of his head a red mush, empty eyes staring hard into nothing. His brain bits splattered on the ground and wall behind his corpse. Little gray flecks everywhere. Each little bit held some fragment of the man's past. Everything he ever did recorded in the gray matter of his brain. And Nestor destroyed all those years of work, play, and love in a matter of mere *momentos*.

Nestor pulled at his shirt. The room felt hot and sticky like the inside of a dog's mouth. Deserts shouldn't feel hot and sticky. Nestor watched as Ignacio rolled the body up in the tarp, wrapping up the body like some morbid burrito.

“*Dios mío*,” Nestor said. He collapsed to the floor, pressing the heels of his palms into his hand. What more could they ask?

“*Ey vato*, come here and help me carry the body out to the car. This piece of shit ain't going to bury himself.”

Nestor retrieved the Glock and tucked it into the front of his pants before hoisting the man's body up. The car, parked out back, looked like a scrap of rust held together by dreams and duct-tape—more of a boat on wheels. The old car's large trunk space would come in handy now.

Outside, the air felt just as hot, if not hotter than inside the house, but not as humid. *Afuera*, out near

the ass end of town, the stars glared down at him. Less light pollution, his pops told him. *Papá* loved the stars. Nestor felt more grounded, more down to earth outside. Here in the desert the earth grew no grass, just empty brown expanses filled with Jumping Cholla, Joshua Trees, and Creosote bushes. Hard things—things that didn't need much to survive and relied on themselves. A landscape he could respect.

The back end of the car sunk in a little as they dumped the body inside. They'd already killed the guy so why bother respecting him now, no? He'd just killed someone. Nestor just couldn't bring himself to believe it. He'd put a bullet in his fucking head. Ended a life quicker than an ice cube melts on a hot day. He didn't know what to think or how to feel about it. He imagined that by killing a man he lost some essential part of himself. Much like an infant who loses a balloon he's held onto for days, because someone convinces the child to pop it. Not knowing the consequences, he can never go back to the way things were before. No longer did he feel the tug of the balloon at his wrist. No longer did its vibrant colors fill his vision. All that was left was the thin rubbery corpse in his hands. Murderer. *Asesino*. Killer. These labels he knew he'd carry around, patches on the dirty coat of his skin.

A car backfired in the street next to them.

The sound made Nestor duck and cower. Somehow his body thought that by getting closer to the ground he'd become less obtrusive. Now that he thought about it, his guilty behavior more than anything else would get him caught.

"Get in the car, *esse*. We got places to go, people to see, bodies to bury." Ignacio pounded the top of the car, then chuckled.

Ignacio pulled onto Kiowa. The body in the trunk thumped when they drove over the railroad

tracks. Twice they passed another car, Nestor's stomach bunched up like bacon on a skillet both times. The AC in car didn't work so they rolled down the window. He just sat and contemplated the hot air blowing in his face, till Ignacio punched him in the arm telling him to chill out.

"Nestor," Ignacio said. "The hard part is already done. You don't got nothing to worry about no more."

"But what if a cop pulls us over?"

"Ain't no cop going to pull us over. We're too far out. Sides they ain't got probable cause."

Nestor just shook his head. Ignacio lit up a cigarette and offered Nestor one. He took a cigarette and lit it with the lighter in the dashboard. The smoke helped to calm his nerves and his hand stopped shaking a little.

"Hey I know I've been hard on you *carnal mio*, but it's for your own good. You done well."

"*Si lo dices*."

Ignacio looked over at him. His right hand steered the car, his left hand held his cigarette, the smoke curling out the window. "How about this Nestor. After we get rid of this chump I take you out to Denny's. It's like, the only place still open right now."

"Fine."

Nestor noticed every bump in the road, every Ponderosa Pine decorating every prim gringo house. Not a single house had a green lawn if they had grass at all. This year the drought cut the heart out of every blade of grass. The railroad tracks followed them on their left hand side. It didn't take them long to run out of paved road. This part of town belonged to the County of San Bernardino, it didn't even belong to the town of Apple Valley. Because of that, the dirt roads got grated maybe once every other month. The body

in the back was sure to leave a mess from hopping around like a Mexican jumping bean. They traveled a ways from the creek, which meant less plant life and less people. They planned to go up a ravine, off road a bit and toss the body into a pit they'd dug earlier.

Ignacio had started treating him a lot nicer almost immediately after he killed the man—a byproduct of passing his initiation into the Desert Rats. Did he even still want to join? He supposed he didn't have much of a choice. He was part of something bigger now, part of the Desert Rats. They couldn't make him do something harder than kill a man, *verdad*?

A big bump in the road caused him to hit his head on the roof of the car. The washboard grind of dirt roads grated at his nerves. This day had gone on long enough. He wanted to get rid of this body, take a long hot shower to wash away the sticky wet feeling and go to bed.

Off in the distance he could hear the yipping of a coyote and dogs howling in response. The car slammed over a hump in the road and scared a solitary jackrabbit out of a creosote bush. Nestor watched it as it hopped in front of the car, trying to escape the threat of death, a white blur in the headlights. It pumped its back legs with all the fury it could muster. It soon grew smart enough to dodge to the side. They drove so far out into the middle of the desert that barrel cacti alone kept them company.

Out of the car, he took a deep breath. Almost midnight and the air still oppressed his lungs. Ignacio jangled his keys searching for the one to the trunk. The car dated back to a time when a man need several keys to the same damn vehicle. When Ignacio found the right one, he popped the trunk. Nestor dared not look inside. He knew from the metallic rank that permeated the air that the body had bloodied the

trunk. He didn't want any blood on him.

"Hurry up and get the legs," Ignacio said. "*Rapido.*"

Pulling his shirt over his nose, he walked to the trunk. A puddle of blood pooled in the downhill corner of the trunk. The tarp came undone and he could see the man's face, mutilated forehead, and staring eyes. Why didn't they shut his eyes? Goosebumps danced up his arms and he couldn't repress the shiver that went down his spine.

"*Apurrate,*" Ignacio said.

He covered the man's face with the tarp and then grasped his legs. Ignacio held onto his shoulders and they duck waddled over to the hole. In the *desierto* a man dug a hole eight feet deep. The first four feet, nothing but pure sand, and coyotes will dig that up quick just to get the rotting meat smell. The deeper the better. He couldn't even see the bottom. They'd left the headlights on so they could see where they needed to go, but it didn't illuminate the dark recesses of the hole. Nestor didn't want to trip and fall in.

Together they counted to three before hurling the body in. It landed with a sick plop. He didn't want to look in. He'd seen enough of that man, of that body. Done. The shovels remained where they'd left them when they dug the hole earlier. If someone walked by, hiking in the desert for fun what would they've thought if they came across an eight-foot hole with two shovels next to it? Before Nestor started to fill in the grave he made the sign of the cross and prayed for the man. Perhaps he prayed for the man, perhaps he prayed for himself, but the desire to pray rose in him like a rattlesnake that emerges to bask in the sun on a warm rock.

With every spadeful of dirt and sand, he also tossed in a little bit of hatred and anger as well. He

soon wore himself out to the point he couldn't even think. He just moved dirt. Ignacio tried talking to him, regaling tales of his daring and the gangs varied accomplishments, but Nestor didn't have it in him to respond. So Ignacio *de poco* stopped talking to him and started working harder till they filled the hole. They jumped on the dirt mound to compact it, making it less obtrusive at the same time. At last they filled the hole to the brim and collapsed on top of the soft grave dirt.

"Oye *cholino*," Ignacio said. "You've passed."

Nestor just stared at him, his eyes giving away no emotion, no light. Ignacio rubbed his head with both hands, dirtying up his skin a bit when the sand mixed with sweat.

"You can wear our colors now. We should have a fiesta in your honor. It'll be great. We could knock back a few coronas or drink a little tequila. Smoke some of that *yerba buena* we just got in."

"Mira Ignacio, I just want to go home and take a shower. I'm happy to be part of the family but—" He let the words trail off with a sigh. Nestor picked up a rock between his feet and tossed it the side.

"What about Denny's?"

"Ok, maybe after we grab a bite to eat."

Ignacio gazed at him. Stared him right in the eyes. Nestor wondered if he could see the color of his soul. What color would it be? White as *el Virgin* or black like Satan's ass-hole?

"Nestor are you happy that you joined? I know that I was hard on you, but you are my brother now. We treat family, right?"

"I am happy. It just, it just sucks *sabes*?"

In response Ignacio lit another cigarette took a puff and then handed it over to Nestor. Nestor took a drag.

"The first time is the hardest. But it'll get better."

Nestor couldn't escape the yanking feeling in his heart that ate away at his stomach and nerves. He felt happy that they buried the body and this little escapade had ended, but did that equate to contentment? *Por nada*. He just wanted control of his life, to feel like he captained his own ship of emotions and circumstance. Somehow he felt that he gave the helm over to another captain and the he'd spectate from now on. Ignacio stood up, grabbed the shovels, and secured them in the trunk. He sat in the driver's seat staring at Nestor, the fire of his cigarette a pinprick of light in the night.

The desert sucked Nestor's mouth dry. He rubbed his hands on his pants. Out here he could see even more stars. He could make out Orion, not just his belt. A mighty warrior in his own right. His society venerated him, loved him, and respected him. Nestor's society did not appreciate him. Most *gringos* viewed him as nothing more than a plague of locusts. But Nestor knew. He knew that he killed that man because joining the Desert Rats made simple sense. Society wasn't to blame. He didn't have the brains to go to college. He didn't have any real skills. *El Jefe* knew that too. That's why he offered to let Nestor join the Desert Rats. One day he wanted a family, and he wanted to provide for them, protect them, and care for them. Now that he had become a member of the Desert Rats he could do just that. He just needed to view it as a job, like any other. Any job had risks. Any job would have him do things he didn't care to do. Nestor tried to convince himself that killing measured up to fetching coffee for a horrible boss.

Maybe someday he'd look back on today and feel good about what he did. Maybe a whole group of people would look back in appreciation like they had

for Orion. Maybe he'd think that today he changed his destiny—that in fact destiny did not chose this track for him.

Nestor sat in the car and studied the gun. The same gun he used to end one man's grip on life became the tool Nestor used to seize his own. Black and hardened metal encased gears and springs meant for one purpose—to kill. The patterned plastic of the hilt, also the same dreary *negro*. Black like the hole in which he had thrown the body of the man he killed. ●



Natsumi Then Shimazaki
“cinem ve lese 1”
Honorable Mention, Undergraduate

GRADUATE POETRY

Kindling

McKenzie Livingston
First Place Poetry
Graduate

before you burn something you have to say its name
you said in the backyard that day, while on your last leg of painkillers
while rain surged on us both, and the realization that we might be in love
but I don't think there's a pill for that yet.

in the backyard that day, the sky on its last leg of painkillers
seemed to pour out gallons of grief, landing on your fragmented shoulders
but I don't think there's a pill for that today, not today.
nothing is less sexy than the words "I need you," right?

twenty-five dollars for this gallon of grief – shaking your shoulders
as a razorblade of lightning carved a new trench between us
and I know that nothing is less sexy as the words "I need you" but
that's what I said while the ashes gleamed anew.

a razorblade of lightning touched down like a scythe, the clouds
about to rain on us both, while this realization that we might be in love
forced the words out before I could send them away—
before you burn something you have to say its name.

some sustenance

I'm thinking about that time all the coins
fell out of my pocket at Arby's,
cruel punishment for being hungry,
but also there's a certain bliss to be had
even at 2 o'clock in the morning

I guess you could say I've been
air-drying my hair to save the whales
again. they sure need a lot of saving.
I am willing but
my flesh is weak.

do you think cowardice
has anything to do with not
wanting to shovel your neighbor's driveway
even though he exhumed you out of yours
the day before?
and
do you think loneliness languishes
in self-pity at the grocery store,
when there is no one to carefully load
gallons of milk and egg cartons into your car?

do you think the moon cares
that it can't talk back to us when
we go on
and on about landing on its face?
I would care. I didn't think I would
have to redefine what it means to
be a really messed-up enigma
but here, let me write an essay

all about humiliation

and each kiss
will be a new paragraph,
an indentation where we step out
of this quarantine, O dear
I have lain here for so long

that summer we looped through
cathedrals made of trees, and they
stood there just like he stood in
the doorway on a feverishly black
morning, don't wake me up yet, I
remember saying with my eyes closed
so now driving past another sign
welcoming me to the Redwoods
this halo of sin refuses to retreat
into my subconscious, I think
if my inability to commit had
been driving, we'd have crashed
against
a wall
by now

last week Scott Kelly posted
his photos from space since he floated
there for something like 378 days, gosh
what a terribly long time without gravity
to hold you up but it was probably
a nice break for gravity, it wouldn't have to be a scapegoat
for man's inability to stand up straight

I fell in love
I fell for it
the lamp fell
and broke

get over yourself, says gravity
in return I will give you
these heartbreaking views
of Australia, that shiny
pink organ, swelling and falling again,
how does an entire continent end up
looking like a three-dimensional
grain of salt and wow look
at America, a t-shirt that wasn't
supposed to be dried but too late now
much smaller than we all thought

and the usual things comfort me, you know:
children, kittens, the leftover hairs
when he shaved in my sink—
a token, I bet

and last of all I am wondering
why those Mexican women always
sweep the streets
every morning even as dirt settles
repeatedly, so reliable—
honestly (I'm not making this up)
it lands on *everything*
but still
they sweep. If it were me
I would just leave it
there.

science

I'm telling you about science, some disproved theories
and some truths.

*did you know our skin regenerates
every thirty-five days?*

I'm only speaking to you and only the trees are listening
they lean permanently to the right or left
perhaps holding out hope like I do when the wind
greet me on the way to the mailbox
I am always waiting at this mailbox for clearance
to let go of words haunting me

and in autumn the trees don't need a permission slip—
they just let go, disrobe. her face was so bucolic
in that casket. Been meaning to ask her what she meant
by that, dying in her own bed. any other room in the house—

—the one with grandpa's Mt. St. Helens reports drawered
neatly beneath the baroque painting I could swear
changed colors as the day sluiced its face in summer showers

or the one with her great-grandchildren's birthday cards
dealt neatly across the kitchen table, sent out in droves every month
or the one with photos from 1950 of her five sons
leaving her. milky, unused dishes

—any other room would have been a better choice. instead
she gave her final notice in the room where she slept alone
for the past 25 years. I tell you all this and the trees listen

now I'm counting backwards from ten at this stoplight
your face gleams, it's almost perfect
*if our skin regenerates every thirty-five days, you say
that means we get to hold hands for the first time
ten times a year*

waking up this morning it finally hits me
the dawn is not always heartbreaking
the world is not always full of love

Travels Through the Southwest with TheGreatestDrZen and the GuardianAlien

Lauren Ducas
Second Place Poetry
Graduate

I have to escape the schizophrenia forums
do something with my life besides flounder--
dismal decay.

I have to read
something that gives me
more hope than my fellow
psychotics' ramblings
about ancient Egyptians
on earth to steal
flimsy toilet paper
from gas station
bathrooms.

On my last day on the schizophrenia forums, I adopted
TheGreatestDrZen's picture of the GuardianAlien.
With my GuardianAlien, flight into the desert of Moab, be abraded
Moab upon which I shall into comfort.

In the erosion of rock into druids howling,
Awen, Awen, Awen,
in three parts, inspiration cries to a GuardianAlien.

As the erosion of rock into druids, my logic is
eroded into

precarious

thin

sandstone

layers of arches
too dangerous

to stand underneath.

The potential for collapse from years of onslaught---wind and water,
those enemies of stone----tonearto me CONTINUE THE SENTENCE

Yet red rock worn
away by ice and time is considered beautiful
beautiful decay, beautiful wasteland, beautiful harshness and danger.
absence of sound, the wind vibrates the leaves contorted juniper.
On mesa tops, only the wind moves
through branches of juddering blackbush,
ringing the base of a
boulder threatening
to come unbalanced.

I found a grotto underneath an arch slivered from canyon walls
confronted with the water eroding the jointed sandstone layers,
I forgot about my Guardian Alien---
(It's just a thrift-store quality acrid green toy wearing a sculpted blanket of
aluminum foil.)
I forgot about religion, especially the forms involving magic wands so favored
by the psychotic and the transmutation of thought into magic.

I concentrated on, I concentrated on, I concentrated on
the intonation of water decanting
the silken collness of the rust sand in the late desert afternoon
the arches and balanced rocks created by physical stress in the sandstone.

These rocks are stable structures: erosion merely carves the final surprises.
I've left TheGreatestDrZen and the GuardianAlien behind,
I walked through the Utah March,
and I realized,
time will pass.

Nehallenia's Temple is Buried by the Tide

Overcast skies along much of the coast

A fissure of sunlight offshore to the south

Fir-covered slopes meeting sand

Sploosh-splash through puddles

At low tide

Island of saturated sand

Rivulets of ocean

Wind-blown inland to meet

A Coast Range stream

Wind, rain, and sea

Scratching at

Seastacks in the surf

Remnants of an ancient coastline

Remembrance of flinty shores past

Pulverizing breaking waves

Rush-hush of the outgoing tide

At the roots of small beach boulders

Anticipation for the hiding tide

To Live in the House Where Your Brother Died

is to ask your brother, waiting in the idling car
if he wanted to see the flowers in his backyard,
because the oncologist suggested this would be the last
time
your brother would see his own backyard.

And to get the answer,
“No, just take a picture.”

And to take a picture of the veined
purple and yellow crocus flowers
mounting an assault on the lawn in February
while the grass is still brown and dead.

And to drive across New Jersey
from Springfield to Hackensack to Rockaway to Whitehouse Station,
to ferry your brother
to the hospice in your bedroom
to the last blank cloudy snowfall
on the last day of his life
until the only colors seen from the window are the frail yellow petals
of the forsythia, first sign of spring.

Carp

*Kathryn Christian
Third Place Poetry
Graduate*

I knew someone had caught her.

The summer boys were running
fist-pumping, excitedly jumping,
fishing poles waving like skinny
metal swords in the buggy air.

I waded through grass choked with fishing line
to the infantry of boys
slumped-shouldered, celebratory soldiers,
prodding her still-wet body.

She had been snagged—
A lime-green lure yanked,
then sank down
into her flesh.

Gold-plated, sun-sedated her
scaly armor penetrated. Her
tail flicked back n' forth—
a prisoner to the banks
and the boys.

She was a permanent resident
of that grimy pond—

just below the surface her
gold-and-black back
a small island.

A good-fer-nothin-trash-fish
the boys chanted—
yet she's their fat prize
the treasure that was there
for the taking.

I had admired her,
the way she survived—
even when winter's breath
locked her beneath its icy grasp.

I turned away
before the pummeling of sticks
the dull thwack of the knife
the elated screams of summer soldiers
hit my ears.

She had been caught—
and I, the coward, did
absolutely nothing to
stop it.

Love Song on the Quad

I'm never going to be married!
exclaims a girl in the grass.
She cracks elastic gum—
sympathetic sniffles
offered in condolences
from friends.

Thunderous rumble
of generator,
poisonous belch
of dump truck—
a doomed soundtrack
to never-getting-married's
whiny symphony.

Old Main's bell
tolls a low hum.
The white aisle
of sidewalk
beckons pupils
towards its
gaping yellow mouth
where promises
of full brains
and suitable bachelors
await.

I am their witness
the groomless bride
married to books—
my scholastic pride!

Never-getting-married
is whisked away
on cloud of urgency—
comforting claps
of pats on the back.
To class, to class
their feet repeat a
sing-song tale
of youth
and defeat.

A Walk with a Distant Lover on Cannon Beach

Today on Cannon Beach
where gray mist
kisses white-caps
I swear I see you walking
the thin line between
land and sea.

Your blonde hair
swirls around
my calves—
yellow sea grass
swaying back and forth
untamed.

I hear your skateboard—
its quick, metallic bite
riding the spinal cord
of cobblestone beach streets
like the way my fingers
once traveled down
the curvature
of your broken back.

I catch your salt and seaweed
scent, storied waves
of that little haven

between corded neck n' shoulder
where I once rested.

You soar
In rough western winds,
the salt n' pepper seagull,
whose playful screams
call to me
fly up here, the view is great!

Your fingers
intertwine with mine
the breath of Pacific wind
traces and backtracks,
curling around
the pink-white shell
of my palm.

I feel your watery hands
pull at my thighs,
the way a riptide would
and I want to succumb,
drown
in the lethal current.

Perhaps I would drown
if you were here.
Mother schooled
that men can't save you
from yourself.
Vagabond lover—
you always hover
between hero
and villain.

You, the man on the horizon,
only exist in pretty metaphors
found in beach towns
and the murky waters
of my thoughts.

Today on Cannon Beach,
I saw you in everything,
then wondered why you
weren't here.



GRADUATE NONFICTION

Faux Fire Starter

Keoki Kemp
*First Place Nonfiction
Graduate*

My mother tells me I killed my baby brother. My father insists I didn't.

Our house had two stories, and I remember that my little brother would crawl down those stairs, into the kitchen, and then he'd open up the dishwasher so that he could get on the counter. After he got on the counter, he'd open up a cabinet and try and mix either hot-cocoa or orange juice – sometimes both of them together. My father had given him some of his old toys, some heavy, metal Tonka Trucks which he loved to toss down the stairs. My dad would sit him next to the older kids during meals, and he'd throw food everywhere. His deep, dimpled grin breathed warmth in a room like a furnace.

I remember that house. One time, I left a plastic gun outside, so I went to pick it up. When I did, I got bit by a hive of fire ants who'd made their home inside my plastic gun. Dad rushed me into the bathroom where he drew up a cool bath to sooth all the scorching bites.

I can recall just a few memories of the day my brother died. Someone, either one of my parents or the neighbors, called 911. I watched smoke smolder up from the roof as I sat in the back of an ambulance. They put a clamp on my finger to monitor my heart rate. The thing pinched so hard that I kept on taking it off. I quickly burned through the EMT's patience, and he soon grew too irritated to deal with me.

In a dream, I am haunted by the ghost of a possible memory, something that may only exist in dreams. I feel, sense, through the three-times gravity haze of dream-memory that I walk up the stairs. I go to the room where my baby brother, Gibby, sleeps. I open up the window and look at the tall sunflowers. I pop open the matchbox and flick the phosphorus tip into life. The brief red hair of the head bites my fingers, so I throw the stick outside. I do it again.

I don't know how many red heads I extinguish by tossing them out the window. Sometimes in dreams, I see the curtains catch fire, other times I smell the sting of smoke as it curls into my nose and tickles my throat. But the uncertainty always lingers. Did I do it? Something I do remember: the talk I had with the fire marshal. My mother whispers in my ear, "tell him what you told me."

I know I didn't look the man in his eyes. I don't remember feeling guilty for starting the fire. One of the firemen had given me a stuffed bear with long golden fur that I named Blue after the main character in Bear in the Big Blue House.

"I did it," I said. "I went upstairs and opened up the window and threw the matches outside."

He asked me, "Are you sure, son?"

My mother responded, "Of course he's sure, aren't you?"

"Yes mom."

I never remember doing it, just recollections like snowflakes on my eyelashes – I see them brief and bright before they melt away – of dreams where I strike the match, then I fade away. Dreams of how I killed my brother. My dad says he found a letter written by one of my mother's daughters from a previous marriage stating that she had been smoking weed upstairs, and tried to dispose of it when she thought she heard someone coming upstairs. This letter – which I've never read – my mother absconded with in the divorce. I don't know who to believe.

Any time I look in a fire, I wonder how my brother fairs, and if he watches over me or protects me. I ask for forgiveness sometimes, as I look in the fire just in case I did murder him – I didn't know that playing with matches could be bad. Though, part of me wonders if I had the dexterity in my tiny fingers at that age to light a match. I still have trouble lighting matches. At other times, when entranced by the hypnotic flickering of the flames, I think of my mother and wonder what kind of woman blames her son for that sort of thing? Has she no comprehension of the scarring and questions that will cause this boy to have growing up? Killing someone, on purpose or on accident, leaves an invisible scar in deep tissue. Worse still, not knowing the truth. How can a man atone for the shadows of possible actions? ●

Shay Larsen
Second Place
Nonfiction
Graduate

